LOVE IN THESE DAYS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE LOOM OF YOUTH
PLEASURE
THE LONELY UNICORN [1]
CARD CASTLE
KEPT: A STORY OF POST-WAR LONDON

PUBLIC SCHOOL LIFE
MYSELF WHEN YOUNG
ON DOING WHAT ONE LIKES

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LOVE IN THESE DAYS

A MODERN STORY

BY

ALEC WAUGH

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THIS PANORAMA

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CONTENTS

PART I

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	THE WAY THINGS START	3
II.	HARD-HEARTED LADY	20
III.	A HALF LIE AND ITS SEQUEL	27
IV.	LOVE AMONG THE WORLDLINGS	35
V.	A COCKTAIL PARTY	45
VI.	AN OFFER OF RELEASE	69
VII.	LILITH OF OLD	83
VIII.	THE PRICE OF VIRTUE	94
IX.	THE REWARDS OF BEAUTY	108
X.	HOW THINGS DEVELOP	113

PART II

XI.	VARIETIES OF LOVE	127
XII.	DINNER FOR FIVE	141
XIII.	" THE CAVE OF MELODY "	148
XIV.	TWELVE HOURS OF TURMOIL	159
XV.	CHRISTOPHER INTERVENES	182
XVI.	THE ENCHANTED HOURS	195
XVII.	TOO LATE	205
XVIII.	A LAST ATTEMPT	227

PART III

CHAP.		PAGE
XIX.	J'EN AI SOUPÉ	241
XX.	A RE-OPENED CHAPTER	251
XXI.	BY AIR AND SEA	267
XXII.	IN PARIS AND ALONE	277
XXIII.	THE COST OF LOVING	298
XXIV.	THE SETTLING OF ACCOUNTS	312
	EPILOGUE	335

PART I

LOVE IN THESE DAYS

CHAPTER I

THE WAY THINGS START

"I SHOULD doubt," remarked Graham Moreton as he guided his two-seater out of the noise and glare of Piccadilly into the quieter by-ways of Soho, "if we were going to have a particularly exhilarating evening."

At his side Joan Faversham stirred, a little restively.

"Why not?" she asked.

"The dances at the Gloucester Galleries," he answered, "are never up to much, and we shan't know many people there."

"I see." And drawing her fur-fringed cloak the tightlier about her, she pressed herself more closely into the corner of the car. "There was a time," she had it in her mind to snap at him, "when you used to say that it didn't matter where we went as long as we were together. There were only two kinds of dances, you said then. The ones I was at and the ones I wasn't at. It's different now, I suppose, now that we've been engaged two years." The words trembled on her lips but she bit them back.

"I mustn't be silly," she told herself. "I mustn't be a pig just because things are going wrong. It's my fault, really, that they are." At least, she supposed it was. But things had been more than ordinarily difficult. To begin with, there had been Grace

Garston's wedding; and as she had walked up the wide curving staircase to smile her greetings on the bride she could not help remembering that night such a few months back when Grace had lain sobbing desperately in her arms. "You're lucky," Grace had cried. "You're engaged. You've got the man you want, while I. . . ." She had felt so proud, so confident then, in the certainty of Graham's love for her. Yet now, with herself exactly where she had been twelve months before, with marriage apparently no nearer, here was Grace Garston married. And she had realized in the slightly exaggerated warmth of her friend's welcome how conscious Grace was of the contrast in their conditions. "A year ago," she seemed to be saying to her, "I was lonely and wretched and defenceless, while you were safe and loved, with an assured future, in a position from which you could be kind and pity me, whereas now you see. . . ."

It was petty of her, Joan realized, to feel envious. She despised herself for being it. It was not Graham's fault after all, that their engagement had been so prolonged. As chief foreign representative of the Universal Oil and Enamel Company he had during the last three years increased the company's export business so enormously that it was only a matter of time before the directors should decide to enlarge their export department, placing him in control of a London branch. And till that time came he and Joan had decided to delay their marriage.

It was not that they had not enough money to marry now. Graham was making with commissions between six and seven hundred pounds a year, and Joan's people were relatively well off. The nature of his work entailed, however, sudden and prolonged trips to the Continent and South America. For at least five months of the year he was out of England, and these were unsettling conditions to start marriage on.

"You'd better wait," Mr. Faversham had said.

"Joan's only twenty and you're twenty-eight. You've got tons of time. Keep yourself free for the next eighteen months to go away when you like and where you like. Build up your foreign connections, so that your position will be really strong by the time you come to take over the management in London; so strong that subordinates will be able to carry on for you. You couldn't be really free to do that if you were to marry."

They had taken his advice. Every two or three months Graham had been rushed abroad, interviewing, prospecting, drafting contracts. His position had been considerably strengthened, but marriage had come no closer. And two years was a long time to be engaged. It was hard for her not to feel a little envious of the white georgette and lilies, above which with so radiant a smile Grace was accepting her friend's congratulations.

And then when Christopher Stirling had begun with his languid elegance to ask her about her plans . . .

"Our plans?" she had answered bitterly. "Very much what they were two years ago. We are waiting as we were then."

He had smiled, a quick, diffident, curiously winning smile, the sort of smile that made people who had known him seven minutes imagine they had been his friend for half a lifetime.

"And you've been engaged two years," he said. "It's a long while. I should think you must sometimes find it a little difficult."

From any other man such a suggestion would have seemed to Joan an unpardonable impertinence. But with Chris it was somehow different. There was a sympathy, a kindliness, a sense of intimacy in his attitude that unweaponed her.

"Sometimes," she replied, pausing as though uncertain whether to say more; as though uncertain whether more were expected of her. She was not one to whom confidences came easily, particularly where she cared intensely; but she was sad and in need of sym-

pathy, and the light was kindly in the well-shaped, indolently handsome face that bent above her.

She nodded her head.

"Being engaged isn't an altogether happy business," she said. "You see, one expects—I don't quite know what one expects. Chiefly that nothing's ever going to be the same again, and in a way it isn't. One's old life stops. The things that used to thrill and excite you, they're a coat you put away. One had thought of a career once, and one knows it's no use thinking of it any longer. One used to go to dances and to parties, wondering if there'd be any amusing men there; now one ceases to. And flirting—well, I suppose, that's really a girl's equivalent of cricket, and it's great fun, of course—but that's over. One expects it to be, of course. One would hate it not to be. It's only natural that one should want life to begin all over again. And then—well, you see——" She hesitated as though uncertain of how exactly the form of her trouble was to be conveyed.

"And then?" he said.

"Well then, how shall I put it? You find that for a man it isn't quite the same, that you haven't turned his life inside out as he has turned yours."

"You mean," Christopher suggested, "that while the whole framework of your life is changed, Graham's work and his games have gone on apparently uninterruptedly?"

She nodded her head quickly.

"One feels—it's silly of me, I know, and one doesn't feel it often, only just at odd moments, that if you mattered to him as much as he mattered to you his games and his work and his other interests wouldn't go on quite so much as though nothing at all had happened.

"Oh, I know quite well," she had added hurriedly, "that when I'm once married all this won't worry me at all. But with things as they are it's so easy to let small things worry you. I see Graham carrying on with his ordinary life exactly as he was before he knew

me, and I think how completely he has altered mine, and I wonder whether there mayn't be a woman who will do for his life what he has done for mine, and what I haven't been able to do for his. Not that I want to, you understand, but "—and she gave a quick, helpless little laugh—" it's hard not to be frightened sometimes, not to let small things worry one. I wouldn't wish anyone a long engagement."

" When it's once over though," he had said.

She had shrugged her shoulders.

" When."

" It'll be worth it," he had said. " Graham is, you see, a one idea person. It may hurt now rather, but in the long run I'm very certain you'll be grateful. If he were the sort of man who didn't for two minutes on end know what he wanted, who was changing his job every other week, the moment he met you, whatever job he happened to have at the moment would have meant nothing to him. But he isn't. He's decided what job he's going to do, and he's stuck to it, and he's making a success of it.

" It'll be the same with his love life; he'll decide on one woman, and he'll stick to her. The other sort—the sort that is changing its job every other fortnight, the sort that can never make up its mind what it really wants —is just the same with its women-folk as with its work. It can't make up its mind. For a month or so it may be frightfully exciting. But the one idea man——" Again he hesitated; then : " The woman—may I say it? —who once gets Graham Moreton will keep him."

And again in his eyes and on his mouth that brief smile flickered.

" You've been very kind to me," she had said simply. " And I hope you won't get the idea that I'm a ridiculously jealous person. You won't please think that of me. It's only now and again I feel like that. I don't very often show it."

" My dear, I know far too well," he said, " the geography of the road you're travelling."

But for all his kindness she had walked unhappily away into the lamp-lit chill of a March evening.

And then there had been that dress. They had promised faithfully at the shop to let her have it before seven. And minute after minute she had gone on waiting. She had been so anxious to look her prettiest to-night, had been so anxious to make it up to Graham for having forced him, practically, to take her to this dance. He hadn't wanted to. She had known that. It was a charity dance, and Graham only liked dances in private houses and in hotels. But some friends of hers had promised to take tickets; and she had persuaded him, and because she had persuaded him she had meant to try all the harder to make things jolly for him. She had ordered that dress specially; a heavenly affair of pale-pink petalled taffeta, a little on the " period " side. The dressmaker had said with a smile that it took someone really young to wear that sort of dress. And she had wondered with a beating heart what Graham would find to say of it. Perhaps that she looked like a rose in it. She had almost wept when it had not arrived.

And then, when she had come down half an hour late, doing her best to be brave and cheerful : " I'm so sorry, darling," she had begun, " I've been waiting for a dress "; at that of all moments for him to say : " It's well worth it, though. It's a jolly thing "; to say that of a dress she had had six months and in which he had seen her a dozen times.

It would have been easy enough when he had made that remark about the Gloucester Galleries to have answered tartly. But she bit back the words. " I won't," she said, " I won't be silly. He's a darling. And we love each other. I won't spoil his evening."

" Where are we going, Graham ? " she asked instead.

" Clarice's."

It was one of Soho's larger and costlier houses, as costly indeed as any West End restaurant. As,

however, it was unnecessary to change to dine there, it attracted those many who are prepared occasionally to spend forty shillings a head upon a dinner, but would feel sartorially embarrassed by the elaborate settings of Dover Street and Piccadilly.

A stately and obsequious waiter came towards them.

"For two, sir? Here, sir."

Graham shook his head.

"I ordered a table in the corner. Graham Moreton."

The waiter looked slowly and apologetically round the room.

"The corner tables appear, sir, to be occupied."

"But I rang up this morning and ordered one. It's ridiculous. Fetch me the head waiter."

Apprehensively Joan Faversham looked up at Graham. The high clear forehead was puckered with angry lines, and the firm, well-shaped mouth was set. Things were going wrong this evening with a vengeance.

"I am extremely sorry, sir," the head waiter was explaining, "you ordered your table for eight o'clock. It is now twenty minutes to nine. We kept your table reserved till half-past eight."

"And you ought to have kept it reserved till ten o'clock."

The head waiter lifted his hands sideways in aggrieved assent.

"I am very sorry, sir, but corner tables are in great demand and we get let down so very often."

"When I give an order," Graham retorted, "I mean it."

The head waiter was appropriately docile.

"I assure you, sir," he said, "that it shall not occur again. And I will reprimand the persons who were responsible. In the meantime, sir, I think you will find this table very satisfactory."

The table in question was beside a pillar, and a few feet from the kitchen door. It was, however, the only one unoccupied.

"That'll be all right," Joan intervened hastily.

"It's pretty awful," he muttered.

"It'll do, though," she answered. People had begun to stare. She hated being made conspicuous, and she was annoyed with Graham for aggravating into a scene an occasion for which she was herself responsible.

"Oh, very well," he said. "It's perfectly maddening," he continued, as they took their seats. "I'll never come to this place again. Now then, what are we going to eat?"

It was an unwisely, because hurriedly, selected dinner. For himself he chose as a successor to smoked salmon a steak tartare whose preparation was certain to occupy the cook's attention for twenty minutes, without bothering to notice that the *Poulet en Casserole* which Joan had preferred, happened to be a *plat du jour*. By some thirteen minutes the arrival of the dishes failed to synchronize, and Joan hated eating by herself. Minute by minute her exasperation grew more intense.

"How different it'll be," he said, with a gallant attempt at joviality, "when we're married and dine at home, and the arrangements are in your hands."

"When we're married," and she laughed, a short, unhappy little laugh. "I wonder when that'll be."

"When the time comes," he answered shortly, "for me to take over the London management of our export business."

"And when will that time come?"

"I'm not one of the directors."

She pouted.

"You said a few weeks at the beginning. It's twenty-five months now."

"I'm doing my best," he answered, a trifle testily. It was for her sake, after all, that he was making

this delay; for her sake, so that things should be easier for her during the early months of marriage.

"I sometimes wonder," she went on "whether we ever shall get married. It's been going on so long now, this putting off of things."

"Jonakin. . . ."

But she would not listen. The cumulative irritation of the evening had taken control of her.

"Perhaps by the time we're free to marry," she said, "we shan't want to any longer."

"Joan."

But she shook her head wearily.

"Oh, I don't know, Graham, I don't know. Things are so different now. We're getting used to one another, I suppose. You don't notice what I wear, and it's not enough for you just to be with me any longer. It's got to be an amusing place; and among amusing people."

She spoke not angrily but fretfully, as tired people speak.

"Oh, well," said Graham, "if you feel like that about it."

The meal concluded, as it had begun, in silence.

"And now," he said, "for the Gloucester Galleries."

She shook her head.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Would you mind very much—I'm tired—I don't feel like dancing."

He should, he knew it, protest and plead, pet and cajole her into coming. It was what at the back of her mind he knew she looked for. But he too was ruffled by the evening's varied frictions. He had been kept waiting for half an hour; he had not been able to get the corner table that he wanted: he had failed to enjoy an expensive and presumably well-cooked dinner, and he had been more than a little hurt by her lack of faith in him, both as a worker and a lover.

"Very well," he said. "I'll take you home."

In silence they drove through the bright and sounding streets. Out of the corner of his eye he watched her. Ah, but she was lovely, as she sat huddled there in the corner of the car, the fur-fringed cloak drawn closely about her throat, so that only her eyes, the pale cornflower blue eyes, and the freckled tip-tilted nose, and the sleek curve of her corn-coloured hair were visible. So lovely and he loved her so. If only they were in a taxi so that he could take her in his arms and kiss away their quarrel; but you could not at the same time make love and drive through London's traffic.

She did not ask him to come in when the car drew up outside her parents' house; she jumped out, waved her hand, and ran up the steps. The key turned easily in the lock, the door swung open; momentarily against the lighted interior of the hall was stamped in graceful silhouette the long flowing line of her slim figure. Momentarily, to be shut away.

"Heavens!" he thought, "but what an evening!"

For a moment he hesitated on the pavement. What was he to do? It was only a few minutes after ten. And he was in no spirit for a return to his parents' house, to the explanations that his abrupt arrival would demand of him, to the subsequent hour of desultory conversation over a collapsing fire. He was restless and unsleepy. He had not particularly wanted to dance that evening. He was working very hard just now, and preferred to be in bed by midnight. But when one had made one's mind up to a thing, when one had got oneself into the mood for a late night . . . no, no, one did not put on a white tie to come home in it at half-past ten. "I must do something," he told himself.

A few minutes after ten. The dance at the Gloucester Galleries would have been going for about an hour. It would be just getting warmed up now.

After all he might as well. He had paid fifteen shillings for a ticket. He could always come away if he got bored.

"Somehow or other," he said, "I mean to get some amusement for myself this evening."

. . . . . .

It was the sort of dance that from the beginning Graham Moreton had suspected it would prove to be. In the first place the Gloucester Galleries had no licence, and one must be very young or very much in love to enjoy a dance at which there is no champagne. In the second the stretch of land and seascapes along the walls, for whose exhibition a society of undistinguished amateurs paid a heavy rent to the proprietors, was possessed of singularly anaphrodisiacal properties. And in the third Graham did not recognize in the whole room a single familiar face.

"One imagines sometimes," he told himself, as he stood leaning against the doorway, "that one knows everyone in London, but one has only to move a few inches outside the circumference of one's own crowd to find oneself in a world of which one knows absolutely nothing." And the curious thing about it was that all these other worlds looked exactly like his own. There were the same young women with close cropped heads and purple mouths and boneless bodies; the same young men with double-breasted waistcoats and piqué shirts, wide-spreading ties and pleated trousers, tight-fitting cuffs and padded shoulders. As they passed by him in groups and couples, it was the same animated flow of chatter that he overheard. They were, these various worlds, like so many trains running at the same speed on parallel tracks. The same people, the same setting, the same attitude towards life, but because while the dimensions of London had increased, there had remained only seven evenings to the week, there was not room for all of them in the same train.

In the doorway that led from the ballroom to the

lounge, Graham Moreton leant back watching the spate of couples sway and circle past him. In the whole room not a soul he knew.

"Really," he thought, "I might just as well have stayed at home."

And then suddenly he caught his breath. On the arm of a stockish, middle-aged, prosperous-looking man was walking, in a sheath of blue-black marocain, a tall, slim woman. Her face in its helmet of black hair, was pale with the pallor that is less snow's than ivory's. Above eyes that were pale pools of amber, the long-lashed lids were lifted. Her lips were like the magenta petals of some tropical and velvet flower. Exotic as the orchid upon her shoulder, slowly, and with a tired, listless expression upon her face, she walked beside her partner towards the long white buffet that was drawn across the far end of the smaller room.

"Heavens," thought Graham, "but I'd like to dance with her."

Foot by foot, his eyes followed her passage across the room.

"And I don't see," he added, "why I shouldn't, either. She looks bored enough with the man she's with."

Why not, after all, since he had come there rather desperately in search of entertainment, and she was the only woman in the room from whom he was likely to get any. Resolutely he turned upon his heel, and walked after her in the direction of the buffet.

There was a fairish crowd before the table, and it was only by the exercise of tact, patience and a little force that he found himself at last beside her, and in football parlance, on the blind side of the scrum, which was to say with her partner on the far side of her. For a moment of beating and exquisite anticipation he waited till her companion had turned aside to address a waiter, then leaning forward, he placed his hand

upon her arm above the elbow, and announced in a cheerful and perfectly matter-of-fact voice:

"You are easily, you know, the most attractive woman in the room."

Slowly she turned round to face him, and the amber-coloured eyes were lit with mockery.

"But how nice of you," she said, "to come and tell me."

The faculty to be abashed easily was not, however, any part of Graham Moreton's equipment.

"Then may I hope," he said, "that you will reward me with a dance?"

She laughed.

"But I haven't the least idea," she answered, "who you are."

"Nor I of you," he countered, "but you're so attractive and I do hope you'll dance with me."

After the genuine strain of his dinner with Joan Faversham such a light flirtation would be an immense relief. And with such blind wholeheartedness as at the end of a long day's cricket one plunges into a cold bath, he dived into the flood of his own audacity.

"Do," he pleaded. "If I don't dance with you I shall regard this evening as one of the supreme calamities of my life."

"Really?"

She was smiling now, a gay, bright, clear-eyed smile. He was a jolly boy, she thought, so fresh and strong and healthy-looking, with his firm crinkly hair and hazel eyes and clear, sunburned cheeks; a jolly boy, and she had been finding the evening more than a little dull.

"But you will, won't you?" he was pleading. "Number ten."

She neither shook her head nor nodded it: just smiled, a brief ironic smile, then turned towards her partner. "Now I wonder," he asked himself, "what I am to make of that?"

. . . . . .

Number ten happened to be the next dance but two.

And as the music started and her previous partner rose at her side with the conventional bow, Graham observed walking towards her from the other side of the room the man with whom he had seen her dancing earlier in the evening.

For a moment he hesitated. He had noticed that she was wearing a wedding ring. Quite possibly the fellow might be her husband. She hadn't promised him the dance. There might be trouble. For a moment he hesitated, then with a quick step so that he might arrive opposite her at the same moment as her former partner, he walked across the room towards her. He was recklessly inclined this evening. And what did it matter, after all, when so little was at stake? And there was besides something offensively proprietary in the way that the other man came forward, something offensively proprietary in the tone of voice with which he said, "Shall we dance or sit this out?"

Graham Moreton said nothing, but as she lifted her head he bent slightly forward, and as their eyes met he smiled; the diffident smile of a conspirator who is uncertain of his ground.

"Shall we dance this?" the man repeated.

She shook her head.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I've promised to dance it with . . . with this gentleman."

And rising from her chair she stretched her hand out towards Graham.

"Thank you," he said. She made no reply, and, placing his hand upon her shoulder, with long sweeping strides he swept her into the smooth flowing rhythm of "Titina." "Your dancing's divine," he murmured, "but, then, I knew it would be," and as he guided her through the maze of bobbing couples he whispered into her ear those graceful gallantries that fall from the lips so easily when one is not in love, so stammeringly when one is.

"Who is he, that man you were dancing with?" he asked at length.

"That? Oh, a man called Fortescue. Guy Fortescue."

"He's not your husband, is he?"

"My dear boy, is it likely?"

"And why not?"

As far as it is possible to shrug one's shoulders when one is dancing, Gwen Lawrence shrugged hers.

"There are such things as taste," was her reply.

"In some things," Graham hastened to explain. "But if you look round you'll usually see that it's the least attractive man who gets the most attractive woman."

She smiled.

"Which means——" she said, and paused, leaving the sentence unfinished for his completion.

"Which means," he said, "that if utter plainness is the magnet for supreme loveliness that man is the only person worthy of you in the room."

He spoke lightly, smilingly, in such a way as the courtiers of the eighteenth century must have spoken, and she replied in the same key. After all, why not? They had never met before. They did not know each other's names. As likely as not they would never see each other again. How better than in such light flirtation could the odd half-hour of a dance be spent? And so they laughed and jested and in a dim corner of the lounge made mockery of much devotion.

"Three hours ago," Graham Moreton was saying, "I had never seen you. I did not know even that you existed. I had not thought it possible that such perfection could exist. While now——" and he spread his hands sideways with the resigned gesture of one who accepts a miracle.

"While now," she said, "I observe that my cavalier is coming here to claim me."

The music had begun, and with a firm resolute tread the middle-aged and stockish man was walking towards

the sofa where they were sitting. He did not bow. He did not speak. He just paused in front of them and stood there waiting with that in his bearing of complacent, arrogant conceit which would have stirred a subject far less inflammable than Graham Moreton.

And there was in Graham Moreton that night a spirit of heady recklessness. He had been talking, for half an hour, a quantity of high-sounding nonsense. There was the memory to be killed of his unhappy quarrel with Joan Faversham. At his side in the presence of an attractive and unknown woman there was an intoxicating sense of audience. And there was in the smug attitude of Guy Fortescue something peculiarly and offensively aggressive. "He seems to imagine," thought Graham angrily, "that because he has taken her out to dinner and bought her a ticket for this dance, he has acquired permanent rights in her. Oh, well, I'll show him."

And rising from his seat with his back turned to Fortescue he took his leave.

"It's been a heavenly dance," he said. "I've so enjoyed myself. And let me see now, which day was it we arranged to lunch together? Thursday, was it, or to-morrow? To-morrow, I rather think."

Of such an arrangement there had not passed a single word between them. And had Graham, in the glance that they exchanged, attempted either to plead or to intimidate her into compliance, as likely as not she would have found some excuse or other to refuse him. She would have refused, and they would have passed for ever out of each other's lives.

But in the look that met hers so steadily was the gay twinkle of the conspirator. "Say yes," it said, that twinkle. "This man's an awful mutt, and it's the one way of taking the conceit out of him. Be a sport—say yes." And because the request was made in that spirit it was acceded to.

"I think," she replied, "I think it was to-morrow."

The twinkle deepened in the hazel eyes.

"To-morrow. Splendid. Romano's, then, at half-past one. Thank you so much." And, without turning even to acknowledge or look at her companion, he walked with a gay step towards the door.

CHAPTER II

HARD-HEARTED LADY

IN silence the woman with whom Graham Moreton had danced drove home two hours later beside the man whom she had called Guy Fortescue. Cautiously out of the corner of her eye she watched him. Morose and sullen, with the fur rug drawn tightly round his knees he sat huddled in the far corner of the car. Since they had left the Gloucester Galleries he had not spoken a single word. And it was only, she suspected, for the sake of appearance, because they had been there with a party, that he had stayed so long.

There would be a row probably when they got back. For days now she had been conscious of its imminence. It had been a mistake, perhaps, to yield to that rather jolly boy's impertinence. And she had been rash to accept that ridiculous lunch engagement. If she had wished, that was to say, to avoid a row. She was not though altogether certain that she did. It could be a question only of postponement. The row was bound to come, sooner or later, in one way or another; and these things were better put behind one. It was best, perhaps, to make use of the first occasion that lay to hand.

Calm-eyed and with unflurried ease she stepped out on to the pavement as the car drew up before her flat.

"Will you come in," she asked, "and have a drink?"

Guy Fortescue nodded his head. "Thanks," he answered. "You can wait," he told his chauffeur, and followed her into the flat in silence. In the hall she paused to move the wooden shutter from "Out" to "In," after the name of Mrs. Lawrence.

"I hope," she said, "that May Julian's remembered to make the fire up before she went to bed. Ah! and she has."

In the dining-room a high-piled fire was casting a dull red glow on to the walls and ceiling. The room was comfortably warm, and on the table had been set out a plate of sandwiches, a thermos flask, a decanter of whisky, a siphon of soda water and several tumblers.

"She thinks of everything," Mrs. Lawrence murmured.

Fortescue grunted.

"She gets your breakfast too in the morning, doesn't she?"

Mrs. Lawrence nodded.

"She tidies your flat before she goes to work."

"And at lunch time," she replied, sprightly enough, ignoring the venom of his comment, "she returns and does my bedroom. She's a perfect treasure."

"An unsalaried maid, in fact."

For a moment she looked him steadily in the eyes.

"May Julian," she answered, "is, as you know perfectly well, a homeless and not very happy girl who lives here as my guest and helps me with the house."

"One of the many, Gwen," he sneered, "who give you a great deal and get very little in return."

Unconcernedly her eyes met his.

"I don't know what you mean," she said. "Will you help yourself to a whisky?" and turning she walked over to the mantelpiece, against one of whose ornaments was resting the orange envelope of an unopened telegram.

She tore back the flap and spread out the flimsy paper; read it; then tossed it upon the table.

"How absurd," she said. "Just look at that.

' Can I call for you dine Thursday eight o'clock Ralph.' As though I could be expected to know who that referred to."

The expression of Guy Fortescue's face grew surlier.

" How many Ralphs do you know? " he asked.

" Three or four, I suppose, not more."

" And you call each of them by their Christian name? "

" Except the ones that I've got pet names for."

For a moment his fists clenched tightly. Ah, but how she maddened him with her cool loveliness, her long, graceful hands that fluttered ceaselessly, her tall, slim, smoothly-moving figure; that body so rich in promise, so tauntingly withheld.

" And who was that young man," he asked, " that you were dancing with? "

" A friend of mine."

" An old one? "

" Not particularly."

" He didn't seem to be unenterprising. But then he's not in a position where he has need to be."

He spoke spitefully. And Gwen was reminded of one of Christopher Stirling's favourite mots: " Cattishness is an affair of sex, but not of gender." It was scarcely surprising, of course, that he should be in a bad temper. When one takes out a woman with whom one is in love, however hopelessly, one doesn't expect to have to spend a large part of the evening watching another man making intense, if equally hopeless love to her. All the same, she did not quite see the point of his remark.

" I don't know what you mean," she said.

" He's poor. All young men are nowadays. They don't know how to work. And poverty is the best passport to successful gallantries."

" That sounds like an epigram out of the ' nineties.' "

" It's true," he maintained. " If a man's poor he

can say what he likes because he knows no practical woman will take him at his word. He can promise eternal devotion; he can offer everything he has. He needn't think twice first, as a man with money need."

Gwen Lawrence pouted.

"You're cynical," she said.

"I have had enough to make me."

Closely, but with half shut eyes, she watched him. Was this the prelude to the quarrel that had become inevitable, or was it that he had not at this latest hour the vitality to sustain decisive action? He was over fifty and it was after two. Was this merely an advance barrage, a preparatory skirmish?

For a few moments in silence they stood acutely conscious of one another, waiting each of them for the other to move first. Then with a quick jerk of the wrist Guy Fortescue emptied off his glass.

"When shall I see you again?" he asked.

"If you'd care," she said, "to call for me before one to-morrow, we might go and have a cocktail at the Ritz."

With a sigh that was half only of relief, Gwen Lawrence as the door closed behind Guy Fortescue sank back into a chair before the fire. She scarcely knew whether she was glad or sorry that the moment had passed indecisively. She liked to get things over.

From behind her came softly the sound of an opening door.

"May I come in, darling?"

"Of course, May dear."

"Was the coffee all right?"

"Delightful: it was sweet of you to have thought of it."

"But, darling, why, of course."

A frail, timid figure, wrapped round in a flannel dressing-gown, May Julian scuttled forward across the

floor to sit on a footstool at Gwen's feet and look up at her with wide, adoring eyes.

"Was it a nice dance?" she asked.

"Not too bad."

"Did anything exciting happen?"

"What is there that could happen that would be exciting?"

"Didn't someone fall in love with you?"

"You seem to think that people have only to look at me to fall in love."

"Well, darling, a good many . . . oh, but there was someone, wasn't there?"

Gwen Lawrence laughed.

There was, she admitted, a boy. A boy who had been rather charmingly importunate.

"I knew there was. Oh, darling, do tell me, tell me everything."

May Julian's eyes were bright and her lips parted, and her voice husky with a breathless eagerness.

"So you're going to lunch with him to-morrow," she said, as Gwen Lawrence finished her account of the evening's episode. "Do you think that you'll fall in love with him?"

The answer was contemptuously assured.

"My dear child, is it likely!"

And, indeed, from what May Julian knew of her, there were few things unlikelier. A cold woman, men had called her: so lovely seeming and so cold actually. Lovely and cold as alabaster. That was what all men said of her. And, indeed, superficially that was what she was; with all these men about her, and herself so unmoved by any of them. All day long the telephone bell was ringing; at all hours of the day and evening people were calling for her in cars and taxis to take her to this dance or to that party; a continual flow of lunches and dances and theatres.

"It's a curious sort of life I lead," she had once said. "From the places I go to you'd think I had over three thousand a year, instead of just three hundred.

It must be months since I've spent a penny on myself. And as long as men think my company's worth it, I'll go on leading it."

"What's happened to old Holdenstein?" May asked. "I've not seen him here for weeks."

Gwen shrugged her shoulders.

"Holden? I've got rid of him."

"For good?"

"I hope so. He was getting difficult. Besides, I wanted to pawn some of the things he'd given me."

"What a confession!"

"Well, it's true. Men are like the boxes you put chocolates in. When you've eaten the last chocolate you fling away the box."

Which was, in a phrase, Gwen's attitude.

She let men take her out and spend money on her, and give her presents, but in the men themselves she was utterly uninterested. It was always "I went to Ciro's yesterday," or "the Comedy." Never "I went out yesterday with John." It was the place she went to, not the man who took her there that mattered. And because the men in themselves mattered so little, she had found it always easy enough to rid herself of any man who had become tiresome.

"I wonder," said May Julian, "where it's going to end. It can't, you know, go on like this for ever."

"Where what's going to end? What can't go on like this?"

She spoke quickly and irritably. And May Julian's fingers fretted nervously at the blue flannel of her dressing-gown.

"All this," she said. "It isn't much of a game really."

"Who ever pretended that it was?" Gwen Lawrence snapped. "It's the only one, anyhow, that I've got the will to play wholeheartedly. And it's got its points; when one's been treated as badly by a man as I was by Eric, it isn't unamusing to get one's own back on other men. I married him with my eyes open, I

suppose. I was twenty-two. And a modern girl of twenty-two can't plead a Victorian innocence. But what's the good of a theoretical knowledge when one's in love? I loved him and I trusted him. And within three months he'd begun to be unfaithful—on my money, too—and the moment a woman came who wasn't content to share him with me, he went; heaven knows where. Undivorceably, anyhow, because beyond the reach of evidence. It would cost me a fortune to track him down. Not that I should want to. I'm better as I am."

She had spoken quietly at first, quietly and calmly, but the pace and heat of her language increased as she continued, so that by the time she had come to finish her eyes were bright and the pallor of her cheeks was flushed. She had risen to her feet, and was standing with her back against the table, her hands resting on its polished surface, the small pulse in her white throat throbbing. Such beauty, thought May Julian, and such a waste of it.

"It's a dangerous game, my dear," she murmured. "You can't play about with hearts for ever and remain untouched. In the long run you're bound to hurt yourself. Someone will come, someone always does come, who'll seem different from the rest. And you won't know what to do. It's a game that you can only play while your heart's untouched. And it won't remain untouched for ever. It can't; in the nature of things, it can't. You're not a cold woman, Gwen."

Gwen laughed, a scornful, bitter laugh.

"I'm safe enough," she said. "I've inoculated myself against that poison."

CHAPTER III

A HALF LIE AND ITS SEQUEL

BEFORE nine o'clock on the following morning, and before his breakfast was a quarter finished, Graham had been summoned to the telephone.

"I'm so sorry, dear," a soft, uncertain, rather tearful voice was saying. "I'm afraid I've disturbed you in the middle of your breakfast. But I know you hate being rung up at your office, and I couldn't bear the idea of the whole day passing without our speaking to each other. I was such a pig to you last night."

"But you weren't, Jonakin," he protested.

"Oh, yes, I was. I was horrid, perfectly horrid. Everything went wrong. I was tired, and then that dress not turning up. But we needn't go over it. I just want you to forget everything I said, because I do know, believe me, I do know how hard you're working, and it would be silly of us, for the sake of a month or two, to upset the whole working of our lives. I do realize how necessary it is for you to be free just now; but, oh, Graham, it seems such a long time waiting sometimes, and "—after a pause that was a catch almost in her breath—"I love you so awfully much!" she added.

"Don't I?"

"And you'll forget, won't you," she pleaded, "all about our silly quarrel and the horrid things I said, and you'll come soon and see me——"

"And tell you," he caught her up, "how ever so much more I love you now than I did two years ago, when you said you'd marry me."

"Darling!" she said, and laughed—a rich, happy, contented little laugh—and he could tell how at that moment the light would sparkle in the pale blue eyes, and the freckled skin on the bridge of her nose would wrinkle.

"And when will it be?" she asked. "I can't this evening. What about to-morrow?"

But though he was free that night, on the following day he would be engaged.

"Then we shan't be seeing each other till Friday evening! Unless——" she added, after a pause.

"Unless what, Jonakin?"

"Unless I were to come down to the city to-day and have lunch with you."

"I'm sorry, darling——"

"Engaged? But you could put it off, surely?" she persisted.

"No, really, I'm afraid I couldn't."

And from the tone in which she said: "Oh, well!" he knew how the small mouth would be pouted.

"I do wish I could, dearest," he began.

She sighed.

"These business lunches. Poor darling, even having to work at lunch time. And I mustn't keep you now. Till Friday, and ever so much love. You are a pet to me."

Thoughtfully Graham replaced the receiver on its clamp. Why, in heaven's name, had he done that? It would have been so easy to have said: "As a matter of fact I'm lunching with a woman I met at the dance last night." He could have told her how it happened. And they would have laughed together over the incident. Jealousy was not one of Joan's characteristics. It would have been so easy for him to have said that.

But the opportunity for saying it had been so brief. He had let it pass out of laziness, out of a reluctance to embark on a long explanation. And now were Joan to discover that he had been lunching not with a

business acquaintance but with another woman, she would assume naturally that he had had some other reason for concealing it.

"If there was nothing in it," she would say, "why didn't you tell me about it at the beginning? Why did you let me imagine that you were talking business?" And he would have no answer ready. She would be bound to think that there was something in it. He would, in her place, certainly.

Which, of course, there wasn't. That was the ridiculous, the maddeningly ridiculous part about it all. This woman, whoever she might be, meant nothing to him at all. He didn't want to lunch with her. She was a jolly enough person, with whom, because he had been in the mood to flirt, he had flirted for an odd half-hour. But that was all there was to it. The incident would have ended there if the creature she had been with had not exasperated him into action.

It was the type of ridiculous, idiotic mistake into which at times he blundered, with the result that he had got to lunch with a woman whose name he did not even know, and had contrived to place himself in a false position with his fiancée.

He had half a mind to ring Joan up and tell her everything, but decided, on second thoughts, that it would be better to leave things as they were. She would be bound to feel, were he to do so, that he was making a special occasion of what, he was so anxious for her to believe, was completely inessential.

After their quarrel on the previous evening, such an incident would only give her fresh grounds for wondering whether he was not less in love with her. Better to leave things as they were. It was extremely unlikely that Joan would ever learn of that lunch party: it was even unlikelier that he would ever see this woman after it. He had been an ass, and he had made a mess of things. But there was no need for him to complicate the consequences. In six hours' time it would be all over; the chapter closed. "Never, though, again,"

he told himself. "Never, under any circumstances, again."

On his way to his office, in tribute to this resolution, he dispatched to Joan a generously proportioned box of chocolates.

. . . . . .

"A woman that I don't really want to see again." That was how he had spoken of Gwen Lawrence as he sat angry and impatient before the telephone: but it was, nevertheless, with an agreeable sense of anticipation that he sat some hours later on the red plush sofa of the Romano's lounge. It really was rather exciting after all. And as he sat waiting, he wondered casually in what spirit, were he not an engaged man, he would be sitting there.

"I should, I suppose, be asking myself," he said, "whether this were to be the beginning of a big adventure. It has had a romantic enough opening."

And for a moment the thought came regretfully that such adventures could never move into his life again. That side of life was ended. Never again, as he paused before the length of a cheval glass to reassure himself of the proud perfection of an evening tie, would he wonder whether before he again stood there a new and enchanting chapter of life might not have opened for him. Never again, as he hesitated on the threshold of a drawing-room, would he ask himself whether on the other side of the door might not be waiting the romance that had for so long eluded him. Never again in the meeting of eyes across a crowded ballroom would he read the unworded recognition of an age-long intimacy. Never again would he know the intoxicating preludes of an avowal; the dawning confidence, the shy foreknowledge of attraction. Never again would his hand seek a hand that trembled. Finished, and at twenty-eight.

Idly and for a moment only the thread of thought entangled him; for a moment, to be snapped abruptly.

"I'm engaged to Joan," he said. "I love her and

she loves me. And to get one big thing one's got to give up a lot of little things."

In the Strand outside a long, low-bodied car drew up beside the pavement. A door was opened. A clear-toned and familiar voice said, "Thank you, Guy." A slim white hand was waved, and with a gasp of surprised delight Graham Moreton was realizing that she was even lovelier than he had thought.

The long claret-coloured coat clasped just below the hips by a studded circlet of dull metal, marked even more clearly than the blue-black sheath of marocain the swaying grace of the tall body's movements.

"So you're here," she said, and as she laughed the golden lights sparkled in her eyes.

"What did you expect? I've been counting the hours all the morning."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"One never knows," she said, and followed him upstairs.

"I've ordered you a martini," he informed her. "The waiter wanted it to be a bronx, but I felt certain that you liked cocktails dry."

"If you'd ordered me a clover club," she said, and again the amber-coloured lights were shot with laughter, "I should have screamed. Well, here's to everything," and lifting the glass she smiled over its rim towards him.

He was a jolly boy. So fresh and clean and healthy, so different from the type of man that it had been her fate during the last few months to see so much of. There had been a quality of charming recklessness about his absurd flirtation and his high-handed treatment of Guy Fortescue.

"I've told them to do a sole," he said, "*bonne femme*."

"Of many excellent ways of doing sole the best."

"And a Mersault to accompany it."

"I should never have forgiven you champagne."

"And afterwards I was thinking——"

But his sentence was not destined for completion.

Between them on the table-cloth had been laid a slim, long-fingered hand, the polish of whose nails proved it to spend at least one hour a week in the parlour of the manicurist, and above their heads a languid and soft-toned voice was saying:

"So you know each other. But how charming for you both."

As she lifted her face towards the elegant and graceful figure that was bending across the table, Gwen Lawrence smiled.

"Christopher Stirling," she said, "and after all these years."

"After all these years, Gwen Cameron."

"So many years," she laughed, "that you didn't even know that I was married."

He raised his eyebrows.

"And you are now?"

"I'm Mrs. Lawrence now."

"A charming name for you; Gwen Lawrence, a charming name. But I can't stay. I see," he whispered, "my host piloting my brother down the gallery. An affluent if prospective client. But I had just to come over to you. Do come and see me some time. There are always cocktails going on Sunday mornings."

"The old place, Christopher?"

"I'm as faithful to places as to friends. *À bientôt.* As for Graham I always feel it's useless asking him. He's never out of training for one game or another. Besides, I know what engaged folk are. Still, you ought to come and see the portrait I'm doing of your girl. It's rather jolly."

Lightly, casually the words were spoken. Lightly and casually as are so often spoken the words that are to turn comedy to drama. At the sound of them Gwen stiffened. So he was engaged, this boy, who had made love to her under the colours of a free man without entanglements. He was like, then, all the rest. And her resentment because she had thought him for a moment different, bit the deeper into her.

Resentment was, however, one of the emotions that the conditions governing her life had taught her to conceal.

"Do you know Christopher Stirling well?" she asked.

"Not very. I've only met him recently."

"Since he began painting your fiancée's portrait?"

The question was asked in a casually off-hand tone, but she looked very straight at him as she put it. And Graham found to his embarrassment that he was blushing.

"They tell me," she said, "that he's enormously successful now."

"He's one of the six most fashionable portrait painters, and of those six he's not the cheapest."

"When I knew him ten years ago, hardly anyone had heard of him. It was before he had exhibited the picture of that woman he was supposed to be in love with; you must know it: the one he made his name with, but that he's refused to sell."

"I've seen reproductions of it."

"It's a marvellous thing. For five years he refused to show it. He kept it in his studio till he had outgrown the mood in which he had painted it. It meant too much to him, he said. And the moment he showed it, commissions came in by every post. It was about that time that I lost sight of him. I wonder if success has spoilt him. It shouldn't have."

"He'd have had to have been very pleasant once," laughed Graham, "if he's deteriorated now."

She nodded her head slowly. It was what she had expected. Christopher was of those whom neither success nor failure can alter much. The foreground of his life might change but not the backcloth.

"Do you ever," she asked, "go to any of his parties?"

"I've been to one or two."

"They used," she said, "to be rather marvellous affairs."

"They still are. The oddest crowd you'd be likely to find in London. Peers and prize-fighters jumbled up together."

Again Gwen Lawrence nodded her head.

"Just as they used to be. Christopher has no sense of caste. People either interest him or they don't. That's all there is to it."

"And the odd thing about those parties is," Graham continued, "that the people mix—you never have 'moments' there."

"You wouldn't. If a person has consistently good taste there must be a homogeneity about the things he likes. There is bound to be something in common between them, however dissimilar the various examples of that taste may be."

At their elbow a waiter was hovering to divide into its two sections the steaming surface of a *sole bonne femme*.

"And afterwards?" he asked.

Graham turned interrogatively to his companion.

"I would prefer to leave it to you," she said. "You are proving yourself such a perfect host."

She had smiled gaily enough at him as they talked, but her eyes clouded as he bent forward across the menu. He was like all the rest: ready as all the others to treat woman shabbily, to make love to one woman while he was promised to another. And the fact not only that she had for a moment thought him different, but that even now in the light of this real knowledge of him she was conscious while they talked of being irritatingly intimate and at ease with him, made her lips close tightly upon her teeth. "That boy," she thought, "needs a lesson really badly."

CHAPTER IV

LOVE AMONG THE WORLDLINGS

IT was half-past three before Christopher Stirling had exhausted the conversational capacities of his brother and his prospective client. "Can I give you a lift anywhere?" it was suggested. Christopher Stirling shook his head. There had been during the morning less than a brief half-hour of fitful sunshine. The sky was covered now with pile upon pile of thick slow-moving clouds. By half-past five the light would have begun to fade. It was scarcely worth while going back to the studio for ninety minutes' painting. There were a couple of exhibitions he would like to see, and a call or two that might be profitably paid.

"And for me," said Humphrey, "an office waits in Blackfriars. Till Sunday, Christopher." And with a light heart and a springy stride, he turned eastwards towards Fleet Street.

That had been a good morning's business. A prosperous client was seeking to become more prominent through his daughter's wedding. And Humphrey had let fall casually a few remarks on the social value of such publicity as is provided by a portrait in the Royal Academy. The old boy had, in the vernacular of the hour, "eaten it." The sequel had been a lunch with Christopher, and the result of the undertaking would be a cheque for himself of eighty pounds.

Eighty pounds in four hours. Twenty pounds an hour. At that rate his yearly income would be well beyond five figures. One should do this sort of thing

more often. There might be a future for the right sort of matrimonial agency. "Discreet publicity for debutantes." One could find worse slogans. Portraits and photographs and introductions. It only needed organizing.

Eighty pounds within four hours. Imperceptibly the pace of his stride had slackened. One could not waste the last two hours of such a day inside an office. Brokerage on an eighth per cent: when one had been working at the rate of six shillings a minute in the morning. Unthinkable. Especially when there were so many other ways of passing the enchanted period of a twilit afternoon.

At the corner of Chancery Lane he paused. He had told his secretary that he would be back to sign his letters by half-past four, and he had a vague recollection of having promised to discuss with his partner a certain point of policy. Policies could wait, though, and so could letters. There was nothing that was not improved by waiting. And it was several weeks since that dark-eyed, dark-haired girl in the quiet, softly-lighted shop behind St. Paul's had had the privilege of serving him with tea. Eighty pounds, after all, within four hours!

Six minutes later with a feeling of safety and relief and with the pulse of his heart beating ever such a little faster, he closed behind him the felt-lined door that surmounted the winding flight of stairs which lead downwards to the unruffled depths of the Balkan Tea Rooms.

The atmosphere was warm and slightly scented. Against a background of rose-pink paper were hung gold-shot, blue damask curtains. Between a pale primrose ceiling and three wide-mouthed alabaster bowls the lighting of the room quivered like autumn sunshine.

"Your usual, Mr. Stirling?"

"My usual, Mildred."

She was tall and twenty and a little plump. Her skin was pale, but very clear. Her full, moist lips stood in no need of carmined artifice. The dark hair that was brushed back from the low forehead bunched

like clustering flowers about her ears. Beneath the close-plucked eyebrows the brown eyes were curiously bright.

"You're quite a stranger," she said, "aren't you?"

"I've been very busy."

"Busy getting off somewhere else?"

"Is that likely?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I'll get your tea," she said.

She returned a few moments later with a tray.

"You've brought two cups?" he asked.

The brown eyes twinkled.

"You said your usual, Mr. Stirling."

She set out the plates upon the table, and sat down on the deeply-sprung couch beside him. Into each cup she poured a saucerful of hot water, allowed it to stand there for a moment, then swirling the water as one does brandy, quickly round the cup, she poured it away into the basin. With a slow languid movement she lifted the teapot from the tray. As she did so, the sleeve of her frock slipped back over her elbow, leaving the white arm bare. Her eyes met his as she handed him his cup, in a curious appraising glance; a glance acknowledging the existence of an intimacy that was unconfessed. And as always when she looked at him in that way he felt the blood through his veins beat faster.

"You look tired," he said.

"What else can you expect, sitting here all day long in artificial light?"

"It's your own choice."

Between them not a word of pleading or avowal had ever passed. There had been no need for it. Of such moments as these the significance is implicit. She had only to look him in the eyes to know.

"It wouldn't be right," she said.

"Right or wrong, that's not the way I look at things. Pleasant or unpleasant, that's all I ask myself."

"I don't," she answered.

Was she wrong, though, not to? Pleasant or unpleasant: that was perhaps the way to look at things; when, as she was, at least, you were not responsible to anyone. Pleasant or unpleasant. But then how pleasant was it going to be? It would be jolly of course to be looked after, to buy silk stockings without having to save out of one's lunch money; to be able to stay in bed as long as one wanted to; to drive when the sun shone through country lanes; to sit when fog and rain were in the streets in a mass of cushions before a high-heaped fire. That would be jolly enough all right. But the other things. . . .

She glanced, as she sipped her tea, over the rim of her cup at the smooth-skinned, freshly-coloured, delicately-featured face. Yes, he was good-looking, and his eyes were kind, and he had money enough apparently. Did she though want him to make love to her? For that was, she was too practical not to realize, the acid test. And it was so hard to tell. Men were unexpected in those things. There had been, for instance, that really gorgeous-looking boy, with the hair like burnished copper, and the little brushed-back moustache, who just took your breath away when you looked at him. The moment he had walked into the shop she had vowed that sooner or later she would make him kiss her. And when at last he had, it had been—well, what had it been like?—a cool smooth pebble. And then on the other hand there was Henry: Henry who was so awkward and ill-dressed and ill-conditioned, whom she had met at the Palais de Danse, and who would wait for her in the evenings in the street to make clumsy, inarticulate love to her in cinemas and on the tops of buses, but who continued always in an odd way to thrill her, because . . . well, because she supposed, her kisses clearly meant so much to him. She was not to him, she knew, just anyone; as to Humphrey Stirling as likely as not she would be.

"You don't love me," she said.

He smiled.

"Love's a big word," he answered. "And a vague word. It means something different to everyone. In my way I do."

"Your way?"

With a quick turn of the wrist she emptied the dregs of her cup into the basin, and began to count the tea-leaves round the side.

"This year, next year, some time. . . ."

"Suppose," said Humphrey, "that you were to come to a small party at my brother's place on Sunday?"

She looked up quickly.

"A party? What sort of a party?"

"A cocktail party, twelve o'clock onward."

"Who'll be there?"

"Anyone who chooses to drop in. It would be nice of you to come."

He had given the invitation in a carelessly off-hand manner, as though it were nothing in particular that he was offering, as though, were she to accept, it would be she who would be conferring the favour. But he could see that he had made an impression on her. There was surprise and in its way a rather pathetic gratitude in the wide brown eyes.

"You wouldn't be wanting me there," she said.

"One always wants you."

"In that crowd?"

"That crowd will be only my friends and my brother's friends. Where else should you be?"

She flushed, then nodded her head.

"Very well," she said, "I'll come. Won't they be all awfully smart?"

"They'll all envy you your looks," he said, "but perhaps you'd allow me to make you a little present so that they may envy you your frock as well."

. . . . . .

"Mr. Brackenridge, sir," announced Christopher's valet on his master's return at seven minutes to six to the small house that adjoined his studio, "is waiting for you in the dining-room."

" But we are expected, Robinson, to be changed by ten minutes to seven."

" That, sir, is what I ventured to explain to him."

Christopher shrugged his shoulders.

" He insisted, though, on seeing us? Ah well, our vanity is flattered, and if it amuses him to talk to us while we have our bath . . . will you offer him the choice between a whisky and a cocktail."

" Mr. Brackenridge, sir, has already expressed his preference for a bronx."

" Then in twenty minutes' time, Robinson, you will show Mr. Brackenridge into the bathroom. With our shave no one may interfere."

Christopher's valet inclined his head deferentially.

" And in your absence, sir, a female voice that I was unable to recognize rang up but would leave no name."

" An act, Robinson, of exemplary discretion. For the moment that is, we believe, all."

It was a short, dapper little person who carried in his hand the dregs of his fourth cocktail, and in his person the hilarity of its predecessors, that exactly twenty minutes later was shown into the large tile-paved bathroom that represented one of Christopher's few concessions to prosperity.

" Old man," he said, the moment the door had been closed behind him. " I've now done at last what you have prophesied for the last thirteen months I should do."

Languidly Christopher raised his head above the steaming stretch of scented water.

" And with whom, Geoffrey," he asked, " have you elected to fall in love? "

" Nobody that you know, but . . ."

" In that case you need tell me no more," Christopher interrupted. " She is a widow of about thirty-two, earning an income of six or seven hundred pounds a year."

A puzzled and slightly injured expression disturbed

the serene complacence of Geoffrey Brackenridge's face.

"You know her then?"

"I assure you," Christopher protested, "that I am learning of her existence for the first time."

"Then how did you guess?"

"The key to a man's character, my dear Geoffrey, is the woman that he lives with, and as I know your character pretty well, it follows that I should recognize the key that fits it. There can be only one satisfactory woman for the materialist without ambition."

The materialist without ambition was the label that had been affixed laughingly enough three summers back by Humphrey Stirling, at the close of one of those anapæstic evenings when one finds oneself talking in blank verse. And Brackenridge in spite of its truth had not resented it. "Why should I?" he had retorted. "It's what I am and what I meant to be." And they had laughed and filled up his glass and warned him jokingly against the perils of being too consistent. For "consistent," if he was nothing else, Geoffrey Brackenridge was.

In the spring of 1919 at the age of thirty-two he had returned to civilian pleasures and a yearly income of fifteen hundred pounds, with the fixed intention of making the remaining forty years of his life as restful, comfortable and independent as the five preceding ones had been grubby, disciplined and hazardous. "There's only one thing the army's taught me," he had maintained, "that's organization. I'm going to organize my life." And he had proceeded to. Material pleasures were to him the only ones that remained, and he was going to make sure of them. His income, two thirds of which he derived from government securities, and a third from his periodic visits to the board room of Messrs. Joshua, Benn & Isaacs, wine merchants of Soho, was so divided proportionately among his pleasures that there was a margin of ten per cent for unexpected eventualities.

"Otherwise," he explained, "I should find myself in debt, and debt's uncomfortable. You always find yourself spending a tenth more than you expect."

It had been suggested to him that, while fifteen hundred was a quite pleasant income for a bachelor, it was not more than adequate. Three thousand, say, would add considerably to the sum of his life's amusement.

"Certainly," he had answered, "I should like to have more money. But I don't want to make more money. The pleasure that more money would bring me would not begin to compensate me for the inconvenience of having to earn it. It's a question of exchange you see. I might double my income but in the process I should enormously reduce the time in which I had to be enjoying it, and I should reduce also the energy that I should need for its enjoying. If I set out to earn three thousand pounds a year, I should have to give up late nights and long week-ends, and golf in the middle of the week. On the principle of exchange it isn't worth it. I'm a practical man. I work things out."

The materialist without ambition was a good working label for Geoffrey Brackenridge, and now apparently he was going to pigeon-hole love as he had pigeon-holed golf and travel and a quiet taste for baccarat.

"I am waiting," he said, "for your explanation."

Languidly Christopher slid his body along the smooth, pale, coloured tiling of his bath, and leant his head back till the softened water crept upwards over his forehead towards his eyes.

"As a man with an affection for stability," he answered, "you would look naturally in your associate for such presumably wifely properties as placidity and reliability. It was inevitable therefore that she should be between the years of twenty-nine and thirty-five, for it is between those years that woman becomes practical

without ceasing to be attractive. She is not a virgin. . . ."

"Don't be indelicate."

"I am in my bath. She is, let me continue, not a virgin, for if she had preserved her innocence for a dozen years, she would be setting on it now either emotionally or financially a price that would be beyond your means. She is not a wanton, for the wanton makes upon a man, during the months few or many of her absorption in him, demands as exclusive as any wife. She is not married, for as a peace-loving citizen you would not wish to embroil yourself in any proprietory affray, or challenge notoriety in the divorce courts. I assumed her, therefore, to be a widow."

Grudgingly Brackenridge admitted that the analysis was sound.

"But the rest of it?" he persisted.

"If she had no money of her own," Christopher explained, "she would not be wearing clothes that would confer credit on you when you took her out. And were you to undertake the finances of her wardrobe, you would have to reconstruct your way of life to meet so considerable an obligation. If on the other hand her income was a four figure one, it seemed to me that your fifteen hundred would not be adequate for the type of entertainments to which she was accustomed. I assumed seven hundred therefore."

"Which is about what her typewriting bureau brings her in."

"That it should be earned rather than inherited was," Christopher continued placidly, "I admit, a guess. But it did seem to me that you would prefer an associate who would be at an office for the greater part of the day, so as to leave you free for golf and bridge and cricket. And as you seem yourself so thoroughly contented, I could only imagine that the lady was in every respect ideal."

There was an element of discomfiture but not of

ill-humour in the smile with which Brackenridge acknowledged the logic of his friend's deduction.

"You'd better see her," he said, "and then you'll know for certain that she is."

To which suggestion Christopher responded with his invariable invitation to a bronx on Sunday.

CHAPTER V

A COCKTAIL PARTY

A COCKTAIL party at Christopher Stirling's corresponded more closely to Graham's account than do parties usually to their guests' description of them. The people who gathered there would be certainly unlikely to meet each other at any house. The varieties of costume were as marked as the varieties of accent. There were inelegant creatures exquisitely gowned, and exquisite creatures clad about in shawls. There were men who looked like women and women who looked like men. There were men in plus fours and men in morning coats; the width of trouser ranged from ten inches to twenty-six.

" It's more than a cocktail party," someone had once remarked, " it's a social cocktail. All manner of strange things shaken up together."

Sometimes people would ask Christopher where he found them all. But he would shrug his shoulders and wave his long, white fingers in the air and answer vaguely: " Nowhere in particular, they're just folk I've met at odd times and got to like."

" But there must be something," Joan Faversham was insisting on the following Sunday, " that they have all in common."

It was her third visit to Christopher's, but the atmosphere was still new to her. With eager curiosity, she strained her ears at the fragmentary bursts of talk around her.

There were about thirty in the room in all. At the

long table by the window, at which the cocktails were being mixed under Graham's superintendence by a white-haired, white-coated servitor, a pale-faced young man with unshingled hair and a black, high-necked jumper was eating *foie gras* sandwiches as though he had had no breakfast and expected to have no lunch. Beside him a thick-jowled pugilist whose square splayed fingers were struggling hard to prevent his cuffs from slipping completely over the edge of his frayed blue sleeve, was explaining to a lady of maturing figure the difficulties of keeping weight down out of training. A little to her right two exquisitely-attired guardsmen were disputing with a civilian the propriety of the double-breasted waistcoat, and on her left an animated literary discussion was being waged.

A heterogeneous crowd, and yet the friends all of them of one man.

"There must be something they have in common," she repeated. "I wonder what it is."

"Need there be?" Graham suggested. "Don't you think it's possible to arrange one's friends as one arranges one's correspondence—in pigeon-holes? One lot of friends for one thing, one lot for another. Each group an expression of one side of one's nature, with no more in common with another than the various departments of one's correspondence, except that they are all written to the same person."

"Or than the various bottles in one's cellar, except that they all inebriate." This last from Humphrey Stirling in a pale blue shirt and double-breasted grey check suit. He looked considerably more like a painter than a stockbroker.

"But surely," Joan Faversham insisted, "even if one's friends are just the expression of a particular side of one, each of those sides is related to something central, so that whatever they express must be related to something central, too."

"That sounds," Graham laughed, "exceedingly involved."

Humphrey Stirling's thin fingers executed in the air a gesture of resignation.

"Why go into it?" he said, "particularly when the cocktails are as good as these. I shall have another. Chris," he shouted across the room, "be an angel and shake a bronx for me. I'm feeling terribly subnormal."

A casual observer would have diagnosed Humphrey's condition to be at the other extremity of the thermometer. And the diagnosis would have been correct.

It was twenty minutes to one, and Mildred Atkinson had not arrived. For the last three days he had found himself looking forward with a puzzling degree of eagerness to her visit. He had had sent to her a dress in which he was certain that she would look tantalizingly divine. He had rung up the Ritz that morning to book a table, and had put himself to the inconvenience of ordering lunch. It would be maddening were she not to come.

From the hall outside the raised intonation of a woman's laugh increased to an astonishing extent the pace of his disordered pulse. But for a moment only. It was not hers, that gay, birdlike rippling voice. And it was with a simulated warmth of welcome that he stretched out his hand to greet the plump, comfortable, but by no means unattractive woman that Geoffrey Brackenridge was elbowing towards him. Christopher hurried forward to welcome them.

"This," Geoffrey Brackenridge announced, "is Mrs. Marchant."

It was the sort of woman that Christopher had expected. She looked safe, and Geoffrey as befitted a materialist was content to judge all things by their appearance. Safe and worldly and mature, comfortably relieved of her illusions. The ideal mistress: that was how she must seem to Geoffrey. But Christopher could not help wondering whether one could both seem a part and be it.

"It was nice of you, Mr. Stirling," she was murmuring, "to ask me."

"It was delightful of you," he replied, "to accept so informal an invitation. Now let me see, what manner of cocktail would you prefer. The pink-looking fellows, let me warn you, are insiduous; they taste of grenadine, but are composed of rum."

Mrs. Marchant did not appear, however, to be particularly interested in cocktails. She was too anxious to explain to Christopher the mingled causes of her unpunctuality.

"If all my guests," he began to expostulate, "were to have so ceremonious a sense of time . . ."

But she would not let him finish. There had been telephones and housekeepers and the exigencies of a frock.

"But for such a frock. . . ."

And then they had decided to walk through instead of round the park. And they had lingered; it had been so marvellous; the soft, velvet promisings of spring. "The sort of morning," she said, "when one can think of life as something that might as well go on for ever."

"And one of those mornings," Christopher added, "when one could be content enough to let it stop. Life's so good on a day like this, that it's hard to think it can be any better. One has had, one feels, all that there is to have and one might as well go home. It's different when you haven't it; when you have had it and have lost it, or have never had it, and think that the show may be over before your turn comes for it. It's in winter, not in spring, that we can't face the thought of never seeing blue sky again, and sunlight."

Sybyl Marchant listened approvingly, smiling up at him from beneath the brim of her wide white hat.

"Perhaps you're right," she said. "I won't say you're not. Perhaps that's why lovers would be quite happy to be killed when they're in each other's arms.

They're frightened of the future, they are afraid that things will never be so good again. And they feel that while there is a possibility of death uniting them, there is the certainty of life dividing them."

"And does that sadden you?" Chris asked.

"What sadden me?"

"Just that, things altering."

She shook her head.

"Not now," she said. "Not now. Once perhaps. But not any longer. And besides, everything doesn't alter. All this, for instance," and she spread out her hand sideways in a circling, inclusive gesture. "Comfort and clothes and leisure; these things that everyone is telling us are of no importance; they last. We outgrow our emotions, but not our tastes. I remember going once to Ranelagh fifteen years ago with a cadet at Sandhurst who was very much in love with me. And when I got home my mother asked me how I had enjoyed myself. 'Oh, awfully much,' I said, and I told her about the dresses, and whom I had seen there, what I had had for tea and what tunes the band had played. 'But what about Eric?' my mother asked me. 'Oh, Eric,' I answered, 'he was quite all right.' My mother laughed at that. 'My dear child,' she said, 'what a thing to say. Surely you realize that what you feel for Eric, or rather what Eric feels for you, is ever so much more important than anything you've seen or anything that you've eaten!' At the time I felt ashamed. But that's fifteen years ago. For thirteen years Eric has not mattered to me at all. For ten years I haven't even known what he has been doing and yet I am still liking nice music and nice clothes and still able to enjoy, Geoffrey, the very admirable dinners that you're nice enough to give me."

Whether the flush of pleasure that came at that moment into Geoffrey's face was an expression of delight at hearing on her lips the utterance of sentiments so analogous to his own, or whether it was

the smile with which she had spoken them that moved him, Chris did not know. Probably both, he thought. For they were Geoffrey's sentiments, and sentiments particularly favourable to the development of such a relationship as he was planning. It was also a very brilliant smile, and Sybyl Marchant was an extremely attractive woman.

"And I hope," he said, "that you'll be able to enjoy too this quite respectable cocktail which I perceive that Robinson is bringing you. Sufficiently, at any rate," he added, "to make you feel you'd like to come for one another Sunday."

With a smile Sybyl Marchant lifted the long-stemmed glass and smiled across its rim at Christopher.

"That's very charming of you," she said. "But it won't be the cocktails only though that'll bring me back."

"As long, anyhow, as you come back!"

"Which you won't be wanting me to, if I keep you any longer from your other guests. Introduce me, Geoffrey," she concluded quickly, "to someone who will be not too great an anticlimax after our charming host."

. . . . . .

Slowly Christopher turned round upon his heel. Things seemed to be going well enough. As far as he could gather there were no harassed silences. People moving about all right. The various groups were not too static. Joan Faversham had been a little too long perhaps with her fiancé, but then when people were engaged . . . and there was Lady Heresy who had asked to see his pictures and might be encouraged into a commission.

"Miss Mildred Atkinson."

For a moment Christopher blinked dubiously at the somewhat too strikingly attractive person that Robinson was announcing to him. Who was she? Where had he met her? Why, of course. His brother's latest. He recalled the details of that agitated visit.

So nice and Victorian of Humphrey, he had thought, to have an affair with a tea-shop girl. Men were getting such snobs nowadays in these things, that in a few years' time they would be refusing to sleep with anyone without a title.

"Ah, so you've come, how nice of you," he said. "Humphrey told me that you might be coming. And here he is to help you decide what sort of cocktail you'd prefer. I can recommend the pink ones, but with a caution."

She half stretched out her hand to Humphrey, then awkwardly withdrew it, and for a moment the conventional insincerity of welcome failed him.

"So you've come," he said. "I—I was afraid you wouldn't."

"And now that I have, you don't know what to do with me."

She was as nervous as he was, but the conditions of struggle under which she had been reared loaned her a superficial truculence: a veneer of ease that restored to Humphrey his usurped assurance.

"I thought," she continued, "I'd make you feel awkward."

"A person," he said, "as charming as yourself could scarcely fail to."

She wrinkled scornfully the smooth, clear skin about her nose.

"Oh, yes!" she said aggressively.

"You must remember," he said smilingly, "that this is the first time I have seen you—how shall I put it?—with untied wings. But as I have arranged that we shall lunch together at the Ritz . . ."

"What?"

"I had hoped," he said, "that you would have been so thoughtful as to keep the rest of the day free."

He spoke the words casually enough, but in the eyes that met hers unwaveringly was written the sure promise of intention.

"In the meantime," he said, "let me introduce you

to Lord Heresy, he's a nice man, I think you'll like him."

Her eyes widened as he placed a hand upon her arm. It was a cheap way, he supposed, of making an effect. Still, what was technique if not the adoption of one's method to one's material? And it had made an effect all right; it was probably the first time the poor child had ever met a titled person.

"If only," he thought, "women didn't make us despise ourselves for the weapons we have to use to get them."

"May I introduce you, Heresy," he said, "to a very charming friend of mine, Miss Mildred Atkinson."

Into Lord Heresy's face, as he turned towards them, came quickly a hot gleam of pleasure. At last. Here at last was the sort of thing he had been looking for. A Bohemian party, his wife had told him. And he had come expecting to meet a quantity of exciting-looking women; flamboyant and easy of approach. The sort of thing one saw upon the films: with whom he would be able to amuse himself while his wife was examining this painter fellow's pictures: with whom perhaps . . . well, after all, one never knew.

Instead of that he had found himself in this nondescript crowd . . . these . . . well, what was one to make of them? . . . Some of them seemed the sort of fellows one might meet any day at Boodle's. And there were others whom one would scarcely trust to black one's boots. While as for the women . . . he supposed they were all right. They were pretty enough, well-dressed enough. But they weren't what he had expected. He had just been wondering whether he could not conveniently get away. . . . Lucky he hadn't. Wouldn't have missed this girl for anything. . . . His breath began to come more heavily as the brown eyes looked steadfastly, inquiringly into his.

"Awful squash here," he managed to mutter. "Let's go and sit in the corner over there."

As he led her across the room towards the high-piled

heap of cushions, his fingers through the thinness of her frock pressed significantly the soft flesh of her upper arm.

. . . . . .

"And is that all?" Lady Heresy was asking.

For a moment Christopher hesitated: then walked towards a farther easel.

"There's only this," he said, and pulled a long strip of faded blue brocade from the tall gilt frame it covered. It was the picture with which he had made his name and Lady Heresy, as had so many others in the past, gave a little gasp as she looked at it.

On the catalogue of the exhibition it had been labelled, half ironically, Love—1906. And there was not a detail of hair and fashion that did not contradict emphatically what was the fashion for every woman in that room. Instead of the sleeked Eton crop and shingle, the masses of black hair had been heaped high and wide about the face like the hair of a drowned woman still under water. Instead of the straight-falling stream-line effect of the modern frock, there was the tight low-cut bodice embellished with wreath upon wreath of rose-pom-pom, to accentuate the swell of the high corseted bosom. Instead of the knee-high skirt with its shapely curves of calf, one silk-shod ankle alone was visible beneath the black velvet that fell wide and bell-shaped in funereal folds from the high-held waist. Round the white column of her throat instead of the tight string of imitation pearls had been set carelessly across one shoulder an immense ostrich feather boa. There was nothing in the picture that did not date; nothing equally that was not dateless. In the dilation of that dark eye's pupil, in the glint of moisture on that red, half-parted mouth, in the sleek transparency of that ivory-pale skin, in the finger's tightening upon the handle of the jewelled fan had been set and for all time on record the fatal, the inevitable appeal of the woman for whom nothing beyond love exists, the woman who is born for love: to love and to be loved; to whom in

terms of love the panorama of the world's activities is presented; to whom money and the race for money exist only as a means to love; to purchase or to decorate: for whom music is no more than an excitant to love and literature a commentary: faithless and faithful there is nothing that for love she will not surrender, since nothing is of more worth to her than love; nothing also that she will not betray when love has passed, for where love is not, all is valueless: the woman who, if she destroys life ultimately, will make it worth living first.

Joan Faversham, standing on the other side of Christopher, shuddered a little as she looked at it. There, in the droop and rhythm of those languid eyelids, in that protruded ankle, in those half-parted lips were symbolized those elements of life that frightened her. There was the record set of that long bondage that most men at one time or another seem fated to undergo, of that spell that so few women can exert, and that for which so many women suffer; that spell which she had not laid, she knew, on Graham; which lay beyond her capacities, in that unknown, uncharted country in which it was her prayer never to have to tread.

With a shiver she turned away.

"I must be going, Christopher," she said abruptly. "It's been heavenly. I have enjoyed it so."

"You can't think how much less enjoyable it would have been without you," and across his face flickered that quick characteristic smile, so diffident and yet so winning, which gave to his compliments, however obviously insincere, a peculiar illusion of reality. "Of course, this isn't quite true," that smile appeared to say, "but if it were, how jolly, and now I come to think of it, I'm not sure it isn't."

"And let's see now," he added, "where's Graham got to? Ah yes, over there, talking to my old friend Gwen Lawrence."

She followed his glance across the room.

"It looks," she said, "as though Graham knew her."

"It was in his company," Christopher Stirling informed her, "that I met her again the other day. It must have been ten years nearly since I'd seen her."

"Really!" And by an immense effort Joan contrived to keep the intonation of her voice natural. "I suppose," she said, "that was at the Gloucester Galleries?"

"The Gloucester Galleries? Where are they? No, it wasn't there. Where was it? Let me see. Ah, yes: Romano's; they were lunching there together."

Joan did not start or gasp; did not betray, in fact, the slightest sign of interest or surprise. She had mentioned the Gloucester Galleries, because Graham had told her that he had gone on there after he had seen her home, because it had seemed to her the only place where he could during the last few days have been seen with any woman other than herself. She did not start or gasp. But where her hands were clasped behind her back she could feel the pulse in her wrist throbbing furiously.

They had been lunching together there.

She tried to think back over the past few days. On what day could it have been? She had thought herself to know so well the details of Graham's diary.

Saturday it could not have been. Saturday clearly was impossible. He had been playing football against Bedford; he had caught a train from St. Pancras at twelve o'clock.

Friday? Friday was the day of the staff meeting. And always on Friday he made a point of lunching with one or other of the departmental managers to discuss such points as might be on the agenda.

Thursday? No, it wouldn't have been Thursday. On Thursday afternoon he had lunched at Lady Caldwell's.

Wednesday was the day he had told her he could not lunch with her because he had a business lunch appointment.

Tuesday? It couldn't have been Tuesday. Tues-

day had been the day of the wretched evening that should have ended at the Gloucester Galleries.

Monday? It couldn't have been Monday. On Monday he had lunched with her father at their club.

And yet one day that week it must have been, because he had said when they had met that morning: "By the way, I met Christopher Stirling this week and he asked me if we would come to one of his cocktail parties. What about pushing along there now? It might be rather amusing, don't you think?"

One day this week it must have been. Saturday it could not have been, nor Thursday nor Tuesday, nor yet Monday. Either Friday or Wednesday, then. And Friday's lunch was an appointment that never as long as she had known him had he missed.

A cold fear seized upon her heart. A cold fear that it had been on Wednesday, the day when he had refused to lunch with her, that Christopher Stirling had met him at Romano's in the company of this strikingly-appearanced woman.

"Don't be a fool!" she told herself. "Don't be a jealous little fool! There's some explanation. There must be. Of course there is. Aren't you going to trust the man you love? The man who is going to swear before all his friends and yours to love only you throughout his life? You're being a jealous little fool, Joan Faversham. For heaven's sake, pull yourself together!"

"In Romano's? Ah, yes, that would have been on Wednesday, wouldn't it?"

She could not believe that it was herself that spoke the words, spoke them with a voice that did not tremble, and with hands that clasped each other only such a little bit more tightly behind her back. Could not believe that it was herself that was listening, with blood so calm apparently, for the devastating or reassuring answer.

"Wednesday? Now, let me see," Christopher Stirl-

ing was answering. " Wednesday, was it, or was it Thursday? Thursday, I think. Yes, Thurs . . . no, you're quite right, Wednesday it was."

Joan Faversham did not flinch. In the soft velvet cheeks the colour neither flowed nor ebbed. For one long moment searchingly she looked across the room towards Gwen Lawrence.

Was this, she asked herself, the woman of whose coming she had been so frightened; the woman who was to create in Graham's life the upheaval that he had made in hers? She was old. Older than herself; older, she noted with relief, than Graham. This, surely, could not be the woman. And yet, and yet . . . With curious appraising eyes Joan took stock of that firm, graceful figure; the delicately-flowing lines, the head's proud carriage, the strong modelling of cheek and chin, the smooth, high-curving forehead, and more than anything of the light and animation in those golden amber-coloured eyes.

" She's very lovely," she thought. " And yet she must be at least four years older than Graham." Surely, Graham could see, surely he must see. . . . But for all that she argued with herself, the hands of fear were cold about her heart. She had felt so sure of Graham until now, but in the presence of this other woman, with the memory behind her of Christopher Stirling's picture . . . Until now Joan had scarcely realized that to many young men experience and beauty mean more than youth and prettiness: that too often it is a losing battle that youth and prettiness have to fight. Joan had not realized it . . . up to this moment. Now, with a little stab she suspected it. She looked again and it came to her with a deeper stab.

" She's lovely," she thought, " abominably lovely."

But the light in the blue eyes did not waver. Firm and straight she kept the line of her upper lip.

" Wednesday," she said, " I thought it must be. I should like to meet her, I think. Will you introduce me, please."

And with steady tread she walked across the room to stand beside her fiancé.

"Gwen," Christopher Stirling was saying, "I want to introduce to you Miss Joan Faversham, Graham Moreton's fiancée."

With a brave, unquivering smile, Joan Faversham stretched out her hand.

"I'm so glad you're here to-day," she said. "I'm so interested, so keen on Graham's business; I want to meet all his business friends."

It was at that moment that there came to Christopher Stirling a sense of danger: a prescience of drama, a consciousness of some error, he knew not what, committed by himself. What that mistake was he did not know. He was in the dark as completely as was, he suspected, Gwen Lawrence also.

"I was telling Miss Faversham," he explained hurriedly, "of my lucky meeting with you and her fiancé the other morning at Romano's."

A less subtle and less experienced woman than Mrs. Lawrence would at that point have stumbled irremediably: would have stumbled, and in the stumbling have created one of those "moments" whose absence Graham Moreton had acclaimed to be one of the chief qualities of Christopher's parties; a moment that would, however, have perhaps saved herself and at least two others the occasion of much ultimate unhappiness.

The haphazards of the last few years had, however, acclimatized her to such difficulties. She knew no more than Christopher knew the significance of Joan's welcome. She could not tell any more than Christopher what was being imagined to have passed that day at lunch between Graham and herself. This only she knew: that it was business that was believed to have been discussed there. What manner of business she did not know. But it was unlikely that this young girl's knowledge of commerce was any greater than at that age her own had been.

After scarcely a moment's pause she answered, with

such an open and bright smile as had on many another previous occasion unarmed suspicion.

"A lucky meeting," she laughed. "But I should think it was. It must be eight years at least since I met Christopher. We'd quite lost sight of one another. And I can't say how grateful I am, Miss Faversham, to the small piece of business, those few pennies I was thinking of investing, about which I came to ask your fiancé's advice."

. . . . . .

It was nearly half-past one and the studio was emptying.

"I should be so grateful, Mr. Stirling," said Sybyl Marchant, "if you would ask your man to ring me up a taxi. I've got to lunch on the other side of the park and I'm already seven minutes late."

"And I shan't see you again," Geoffrey Brackenridge asked, "till when?"

"When shall we meet again? Well, let me see." She screwed up her eyes and her brows were wrinkled thoughtfully.

"What about a show one evening?"

She smiled.

"That would be delightful."

"When? Any night this week will suit me."

She shook her head.

"I'm sorry, Geoffrey. I'm engaged every night this week."

"Every night!" he exclaimed.

"'Fraid so," she answered. "I usually am, you know, for ten days ahead or so."

"A gay life," was Christopher's comment.

"Oh, I don't know," she answered. "I've a lot of friends and things mount up. One dines with one and dances with another and goes to a cinema with a third. I never seem to have an evening to myself. I'm sorry, Geoffrey, but there it is. What about the week after?"

But Brackenridge did not suggest a day.

" It's absurd," he said, " to waste your time like that on things you don't really want to do."

" I do want to do them, though," she laughed. " I must enjoy myself. Don't you agree with me, Mr. Stirling? "

Geoffrey did not leave him time to answer.

" If you can't manage an evening, what about a matinée? " he asked.

She thought a moment before she replied.

" A matinée? Yes, I think that would be all right," she said. " Saturday, I could."

" I'm playing golf on Saturday."

" What a pity. Saturday's my only day. It'll have to be the week after, then. It is funny, isn't it, Mr. Stirling," she said, " how hard it is to make one's appointments fit. I've given up trying to arrange anything less than ten days ahead. It's simply a waste of time. Life seems to go faster every year. I suppose it's that one's adding all the time to one's acquaintance and with each new friend bringing along ten other friends, I simply can't keep pace with it."

She spoke unconcernedly with a smile hovering upon her lips, but all the time she watched the frown deepen upon Geoffrey's face. He's jealous, Christopher thought, jealous of her other friends and her other interests. Though he wants to be practical in love, though he wants to pigeon-hole romance, to keep it a separate interest, he does not like the idea of himself fitting into a pigeon-hole in a woman's life. They talked on, she and he, brightly and superficially of this and that, but they were scarcely listening to what they said. Their ears were strained for the first sound above their talk of Geoffrey's inevitable interruption.

" Look here," he said, " if you've no other time, we'll make it Saturday."

She raised her eyebrows interrogatively.

" But you were playing golf, I thought."

" I was. I'll put it off."

She protested.

"No, really, no. You mustn't. I can't let you. You mustn't give up things like that."

But there was a glow in her face and in her eyes as she protested, a glow that deepened as he waved aside her protestations; a glow of gratitude and triumph. He had given up his golf for her. And in the smile that passed unhidden there between them, Christopher saw what before he had not seen, what before indeed he had hardly guessed at, that these two loved each other. That in spite of all their talk about exchange, in spite of their defensive bargaining, in spite even of the fact that this very smile had come as the barter price in an exchange; these two so practical and calculating persons loved each other. And in the presence of that smile the world seemed both to be a richer and a sorrier place: richer in that so tawdry a thing could reveal so strong a light: sorrier in that so rare and fair a thing should be so dingily apparelled, that the complicated, economic conditions of modern life should be imposed, that the barricades of caution should hedge round what for these two should have no value save in so far as it was theirs to give; sorrier in that the practical ordering of life should place the heart under the guidance of the head; that these two who in this moment of time so loved each other should not be free to surrender to that moment's richness. What would you though?—the fearless soldier is he who has not been wounded. And when men and women have once put all their eggs into one basket and seen them smashed, when they have come to realize that a time will come when the liberty, the position, the advantage that their nature is now urging them to sacrifice for a moment's heady pleasure, will seem of greater value than the emotion for whose sake they are prepared to make that sacrifice to-day; when they have come to realize that we outgrow our emotions more speedily than our tastes and friendships and ambitions, it is not perhaps surprising that they should seek to surrender as small a portion as is possible of those ambitions:

that they should try to buy in the most advantageous market. It might well be, indeed, that those others who acted otherwise, who continued to believe in the permanence of emotions that they had already once outgrown were no wiser and no worthier than the youth who, having at one fair lost a year's savings at the three card trick, proceeds in the following summer at another fair to embark on an equally ill-judged series of conjectures. It might well be so; but that did not make the affair any the less to be regretted.

"Till Saturday then, Geoffrey," Sybyl Marchant was saying, and her eyes were bright and roguish. "Till Saturday, unless . . ."

"Unless what?"

"I've just remembered. I'm free this evening, if you'd care for us to go anywhere."

A smile flickered over Christopher's mouth. So she was to reward then his surrender with a fresh compliance.

"Care . . . !" Geoffrey began excitedly.

"Mrs. Marchant's cab," announced Robinson imperiously.

. . . . . .

Christopher Stirling followed them into the room, and as the door closed behind him, his brother turned with a smile to Mildred Atkinson.

"I had to stay to the last," he explained, "as I'm half host."

A little nervous, but happier now, and reassured; warmed, too, a little by the cool pink liquid that had tasted of grenadine, she stood rather self-conscious perhaps, in the beaded elegance of marocain, a look of uncertain interrogation in her face; a look that seemed to surrender into his keeping the responsibility of her future and herself. "I have come," that look appeared to say, "the rest is in your hands"; a look though in which entreaty was mingled with surrender, entreaty not to misuse this fluttered moment of uncertainty.

Humphrey smiled to himself at her embarrassment.

She should have trusted him, he thought, not to make love to her before lunch, surrounded by dirty glasses in an atmosphere of stale tobacco smoke.

"And now for lunch," he said. "You can't think, Mildred, how hungry I've been feeling ever since I ordered it this morning."

. . . . . .

It was after four by the time Mildred and Humphrey had finished the slow stroll through the park that had followed a protracted lunch. And across the large low window of the main room in Humphrey's flat, green damask curtains had been drawn. On the mantelpiece two altar candles had been lit; a high-heaped fire flung a rich and flickering radiance on the armchairs that had been drawn before it, and on the deep low divan with its pile of many-coloured cushions.

With a little sigh Mildred Atkinson let Humphrey lift her coat from her.

"My hat, Humphrey. May I take it off?"

"And a cigarette. You prefer Turkish?"

The hand that held the match for her seemed to shake, and she laughed happily that he, where he should be so calm, should tremble. With eyes half closed, she felt herself relaxing to the peace and reassurance of the place and moment. How at rest she was, soothed by soft colours, and quiet talk, warmed by rich food and wine.

"May I look round?" she said. "Your brother said that you had some very jolly pictures."

Slowly she walked along the walls. She did not examine the pictures in any detail. They existed, as they passed one by one before her, as symbols simply of this warm, swift-moving, richly-coloured world to which Humphrey Stirling held the key. How remote seemed now the drab, ill-furnished room at the summit of four flights of stairs, in which she had dressed that morning; with the worn linoleum that chilled her feet through her thin felt slippers, and the zinc, shallow

bath in which shivering she had had to wash each limb separately. How remote and unbelievable.

He was standing beside her now, his hand was upon her arm above the elbow. Through the thin material of her frock she could feel the throbbing magnetism of his need of her. As she leant back against his shoulder, her hair rested on his cheek. He was taller than she was. He could make her feel, not big and awkward as had other and smaller men, but light and weak and graceful, as in those dreams when to a face that had bent over her she had lifted docile lips. The pressure of his arm was tightening; on legs that trembled a little she was letting herself be led to the warmth and glow of the high-heaped fire, to the many-coloured pile of cushions that shimmered in its diffused radiance. One day he would make his brother paint her, and men and women would pause before her portrait. "How wonderful," they would whisper to each other, "she must have been!"

"Mildred, ah, Mildred dear," the words in her ear were hoarse and husky, and the voice quivered that was uttering them. "So long I've wanted to be like this with you. So long I've been tantalized by all those other people."

Soft, soft beneath her, the vast, the many-coloured pile of cushions. How distant, how unbelievable, that chill, narrow little room, with its faded wallpaper and sun-bleached curtains! How easy in this warmth and comfort, with soft colours and soft scents about you, to relax to the urgency of hungry fingers. As she turned pliant and submissive to meet the dark curtain of his kiss, before her eyes flickered for a brief moment a dazzled vision of gleaming roadways, of silent, low-bodied cars, of carpets soundless beneath her feet, of low music and low laughter, of silk and silver, and the caress of sables; of warm and perfumed water in which she sank and sank.

. . . . . .

That evening in a still corner of a Soho restaurant,

Sybyl Marchant and Geoffrey Brackenridge are completing a Gourmet's dinner. There is between them, at least on Geoffrey's side, an embarrassed silence. A mushroom savoury lies untouched upon his plate. He cannot eat it. He is not hungry. One hunger has replaced another. His fingers are fretting the hemmed edge of the table-cloth. He is nervous and unhappy. They must be said soon, those words that are to define and establish their relationship, those words that for fear of losing her he dare not say, those words whose consequences he cannot judge, that will lead him he knows not where. "Be careful," the cautionary instincts murmur to him. "Aren't you quite happy as you are? Haven't you got this carefully mapped out life of yours? Surely that should be enough. You're on dangerous ground, be careful." He hesitates. Then from the *pêche melba* that she has preferred to a savoury she lifts her head, smiles once dazzlingly at him, then turns away. His blood thrills, the murmuring cautionary instincts are set at peace; emboldened by that swift smile's magic he leans forward on his elbows across the table.

"Sybyl," he says, "I don't want you to misjudge me. I want you to understand. I'm not the marrying sort. I must be free."

The silence between them deepens, isolating them in the midst of clattered plates and scurrying waiters and the rise and fall of innumerable conversations. They have been said now, those words, that he has been trying for the last six weeks to say. They have been said. They are a part of them. Nothing that may happen can erase them. She says nothing. She does not stir. Her head is bent forward above her plate. Her fingers rest upon the handle of the spoon. She does not eat. She does not speak. Her face is turned from him. What thoughts, he wonders, are passing behind that smooth, soft-coloured, scented mask.

She lifts her head, her fingers relinquish their hold

upon the spoon. Her elbows are stretched forward upon the table, the plump white fingers are twined into a latticed bridge on which her face is rested sideways. She looks at him quizzically. And he has the uncomfortable sensation of being weighed and scrutinized, and taken count of.

"I see, Geoffrey," she says, "I see. I understand you perfectly." There is a dimple by the corner of her mouth; Geoffrey grows increasingly uncomfortable. He feels that not only is he being scrutinized but that he has been scrutinized; not only that he is being weighed but that he has been weighed; not only that he is being taken count of, but that he has been taken count of. He has the sensation that a general has who sets out at the head of a band of mercenaries without a guide into an enemy and unmapped country.

"Sybyl," he stammers, "Sybyl."

But the stillness in the brown eyes stays him. He cannot speak. He has said all that there is to say.

"I understand perfectly," she repeats. "We've been seeing a good deal of each other during the last three months and you've begun to fall in love with me, or rather you've begun to feel that you want to make love to me, which may or may not be the same thing. And you want to make your position clear to me. You don't propose marriage to be the climax of your love making. And you don't want to place me or, to be more accurate, to place yourself, in a false position. You don't in fact want either of us to be—how shall it be put?—led up the garden? That's it, I believe, isn't it?"

She smiles in answer to his nod.

"So now," she concludes cheerfully, "we know exactly where we are. It's very nice of you to have been so frank about it."

And she returns her attention to the rapidly melting sauce of her *pêche melba*.

For Geoffrey Brackenridge it is a miserable half-hour. He is embarrassed and he is angry. Angry

because she will not display one signal of embarrassment. She finishes her *pêche melba.* She says she will have her coffee white. She thinks that she would on the whole prefer a Benedictine to a Green Chartreuse. She sips slowly and appreciatively at the thick golden cream. She smokes three cigarettes and discusses with the utmost unconcern the details and psychology of a contemporary and sensational divorce suit. Geoffrey is completely wretched. If only she will finish her coffee. It must be cold by now. If only she will sip at that last drop of Benedictine. If only she will not light another cigarette. None of the things that he longs to say to her can be said here, in this restaurant that he has thought previously to be the quietest place in London, but that seems now to him to be noisier than the dance palace at Hammersmith. He waves a hand of summons. Perhaps the sight of the folded bill at his side will hurry her. The ruse fails.

"I think, Geoffrey," she says, "I would like another coffee. One of the ones they call their specialty."

A specialty that will take, he knows and she knows too, a good fifteen minutes to prepare. Slowly these minutes pass. It is her revenge and she is savouring it.

But at last the meal has ended, the wretched meal that has dragged out its interminable length till after ten. At last in the warm darkness of the taxi they are alone together. The scent of Emeraude is about him. His fingers are stretched out to hers. The tardily-come headstrong words are upon his lips.

"Don't misunderstand me," he pleads, "don't misjudge me. Don't think that I don't love you. I do, more than I can say, I do. But I'm not the marrying sort. I'm not, and that's the end of it. I'd only make you wretched and I love you so. I can't face the fear of that. I love you so, I want you so. Don't think of me as a cad."

She shakes her head.

"I don't think that of you," she says.

His little finger is twisted about hers. Swaying together as the ill-sprung cab jolts over the uneven road they sit in silence. His shoulder is against hers, a strand of her hair is ruffled against his cheek.

"What then do you think of me?" he asks.

Again she shakes her head.

"Ah, if I knew myself, my dear; nice things, though, you can be sure of that."

And there is no further need between them of the poor medium of words.

CHAPTER VI

AN OFFER OF RELEASE

AS is the case with the majority of Londoners who subscribe to the inconveniences of a telephone, Gwen Lawrence's correspondence consisted of receipted and unreceipted bills, solicitations from financiers, engraved cards of invitation, and such notes as: "Half a line, Gwen, dear, to remind you that I'll be calling at quarter to eight to-morrow." It was only on rare occasions that she received what the Victorians would have called a letter, and these were for the most part tearful testimonies of devotion or indignant protestations at despised affection.

It was with some surprise, therefore, that she read on the back of an envelope on the day following Christopher's cocktail party, the embossed outlines of an address in Lincoln's Inn.

"Lincoln's Inn," she murmured to herself. "That looks like solicitors. And I can't think of anyone who's likely to be leaving me any money. Perhaps the wife of one of my admirers has decided to cite me as a co-respondent. She'll have a hard job to prove anything if she has."

And with a hurried flick of her forefinger she tore back the flap.

"DEAR MADAM," the letter ran, "We should be very grateful if you could make it convenient to call upon us one day soon, as we would like to discuss with you a matter of some importance.

"Yours faithfully,

"TERENCE, JOHN & GREENIDGE."

"Terence, John & Greenidge," she repeated. "Never heard of them. Well, let's see what it is they want." And, leaning sideways among her pillows, she lifted the telephone that at night she had always moved from the drawing-room to a small table by her bed.

"Is that Terence, John & Greenidge?" she asked. "It is. Good. This is Mrs. Lawrence. You wrote to me this morning."

It was a thick but ingratiating voice that answered her.

"Ah, yes, Mrs. Lawrence, of course."

"You wanted to see me. What was it about?"

"On a matter, Mrs. Lawrence, that it would be scarcely proper or indeed desirable to discuss across a telephone."

"So? Then you'd better, hadn't you, send someone up here to discuss it with me."

At the other end of the line there was a little gasp, followed by a pause.

"But, Mrs. Lawrence," the voice resumed more ingratiatingly than ever, "we are busy people——"

"And I am an extremely busy woman."

"Yes, yes, I'm sure, I'm sure," he gabbled hastily, "very busy, extremely busy. At the same time, Mrs. Lawrence——"

She cut him short.

"I'm not going to discuss it," she answered testily. "You want apparently to see me. As far as I know I have no reason for wishing to see you."

"It will be to your advantage——"

Again she interrupted him.

"The more it may be to my advantage the more it will be to yours. I shall be in this morning," she added, "till twenty-five past twelve."

At the other end of the line there was a little sigh.

"It is most unusual."

"I shall be in," Gwen Lawrence repeated, "till twenty-five past twelve," and, replacing the receiver,

she rolled back again into the warmth and comfort of her bed.

"It's curious," she murmured to herself, "how easy it is to get things done for one the moment one has ceased to mind whether one has them done or not."

At five minutes to twelve there was a knock upon the front door and a card on which were engraved in Baskerville italics, "*Terence, John & Greenidge*," was presented by an exquisite young person with one of those foolproof figures for which it is scarcely possible for a tailor to build a badly-fitting suit.

The effect was almost too exquisite in fact. The double-breasted lapels lay back too smoothly on the creaseless shoulder; the weight of the coat was borne with too little effort by the second button. One could have wished that the pockets gave the appearance of having served at any rate at some point in there existence as the receptacles for a tobacco pouch; beneath the tapered points of the waistcoat the pleats of the trousers curved with an excess of grace. And it was a pity that the pattern of the tie was repeated so closely in the crêpe handkerchief at the breast pocket.

With a smile and a slight inclination of the head he walked forward.

"I have come," he said, "on behalf of Terence, John & Greenidge." He paused, looked quickly round the room, smiled again, executed an inclusive gesture of the hand: "Such a charming flat——"

"It is nice of you," she said, "to like it."

"But who could fail to?" And stepping across the floor, he peered slowly at one of the black-framed etchings on the walls. "You will excuse me," he said; "modern art interests me so intensely. A Wadsworth, ah no, a Nash. An admirable example of a most distinguished art. The most personal, I sometimes consider, of all our more recent painters. Pattern, that's what I find there, pattern."

The rich amber-coloured eyes glowed with a gentle

mockery. So this was the new technique—the modern business method that had found its way even to the walled cities of the law. Had there been prints of horses on the walls, he would have discussed with equal volubility and equal superficiality the chance of Spawn Spadah in the Grand National.

"This matter, Mr. Terence, on which you wished to speak to me?"

"Ah, yes, this matter," and, stepping soundlessly across the floor, he seated himself in a corner of the chesterfield and leant forward confidentially. "It is, if I may say so, Mrs. Lawrence, a slightly delicate matter. It concerns your husband."

"Ah!" Involuntarily the exclamation sprang from her lips, but her back was to the light and he could not see how the faint lines about her mouth and eyes were tightened.

"We may assume, may we not," he continued brightly, "that the relations between your husband and yourself have not recently been too happy?"

"His continued absence from this flat would justify that assumption."

"Exactly. Now we have been in touch lately with your husband."

"What! You have seen him? He's in London?"

A suave, deprecatory hand was lifted.

"We have been in touch with your husband," Mr. Everard Terence corrected her, "and it has occurred to him that possibly you might wish the existing condition of affairs to be discontinued."

"You mean——" the room was swimming before her eyes; the breath in her throat was choking her. Against the cool satin slip her heart was thudding. Did Eric want, then, to come back? And if he did, what was she to do? She felt lonely suddenly and weak: defenceless before the return of a love that had once so thrilled her. "You mean——?" she repeated tonelessly.

The reply came jauntily, as one that this polished

person was in the habit of making with refreshing frequency.

"It occurred to him that it might possibly be in your interests to be free."

Twice quickly Gwen Lawrence blinked. So it was no more than that, then. The time had come for Eric to feel that a divorce would suit him.

"He thought," Mr. Terence continued, "that a person, may I say, as attractive as yourself," and the large smooth features were animated by a courtly smile, "might find herself very easily in the position of wishing to remarry. Our client, I may say, does not find himself in any such position. Marriage, he has told us, is the last proposition that he would consider. Any proceedings, therefore, that he might be induced to take would be taken with the sole purpose of affording you relief. It would be a completely disinterested act. As far as he is concerned, he is content that things should continue as they are. But for you he realizes things may be very likely different."

He paused on a note of interrogation that Gwen ignored.

"Go on," she said.

Mr. Terence shrugged his shoulders as though he were loth to conduct the conversation down avenues where delicacy might hesitate to accompany it.

"Our client, I repeat," he said regretfully, "has not, as far as he is himself concerned, the slightest inducement to seek his freedom. Indeed, he has a great number of very cogent reasons for wishing to avoid it. The world is more tolerant than it used to be on such occasions. But even now the Divorce Courts leave their stigma, especially in certain professions. Our client is engaged at the moment in work the exact nature of which I cannot naturally particularize, but for which an unblemished record is essential. It is not unlikely that our client would lose his appointment were he to become involved in such

proceedings. That, of course, is a very serious consideration."

Again he paused on the same note of interrogation, and again Gwen Lawrence refused to assist his suave unravelling of his theme. Again Mr. Terence shrugged his shoulders.

"Our client, you will see," he continued, "has nothing to gain and a very great deal to lose. He is conscious, however, very rightly, though also, I consider, very chivalrously, of certain moral obligations that he has towards you. And he is prepared to help you in any way he can, short, that is needless to say, of actual loss to himself."

Again he paused, and this time Gwen Lawrence took up her cue. Like a short-arm jab with the whole of the boxer's weight swung into it, the clear-cut sentence crashed heavily through Mr. Terence's guard.

"How much does he want?" she asked. "Will a thousand buy him?"

For a full half-minute Terence, John & Greenidge's social representative was incapable of answer.

"That is not," he said at length, "the way in which I should prefer to have the matter put."

"It's the true way. He's ready to give me the freedom I've a perfect right to if I'll buy it at the price at which he's pleased to value it."

There was an unhappy expression on the face of Mr. Everard Terence.

"You can hardly expect our client to run, without some guarantee, the grave risk——"

Impatiently Gwen Lawrence tapped her fingers against the side of her chair.

"Now, now, now," she said, "we've had enough evasion. Let's have the truth for once. My husband has begun to wonder whether there may not be someone anxious to marry me who is well enough off to make it worth his while to be divorced. That's how it stands. So let's get down to figures. Will a thousand buy him?"

"The word 'buy,' Mrs. Lawrence," he protested.

"It's the right word, Mr. Terence, but you can use some other word if you think that it sounds prettier."

"The word I used was guarantee."

"Then I will, too: is a thousand, do you think, a sufficient guarantee?"

Everard Terence looked dubious.

"If my client were to lose his present employment it might take him a considerable while to find another. There might be the matter of travel, too; it's not as though he were at work in England; travelling is expensive nowadays. A thousand is not a great deal for such a risk as that."

The corners of Gwen's mouth lifted scornfully.

"Fifteen hundred would probably be a more adequate guarantee?" she suggested.

Everard Terence nodded.

"Our client has, as far as is consistent with his own safety, no wishes other than your happiness. He would neither expect nor ask to be guaranteed a penny further than was strictly necessary. He would be generous and chivalrous enough, I think, to accept fifteen hundred."

"So we know now exactly where we are," and Gwen Lawrence rose from her chair in indication that the interview was ended. "You will hear from me," she added, "in a few days' time."

Mr. Everard Terence bowed and smiled.

"You have been most kind to me," he said. "You have made extremely pleasant an occasion that in less skilful hands might have been extremely awkward." As he turned to go he looked once more slowly and appreciatively round the room.

"How I envy you that," he said, pointing to the black-framed etching. "You will remember perhaps my interest, should you ever have need to be dispossessed of it."

Another minute and the door of the flat had closed

upon his elegant and scented person, and Gwen Lawrence was left to stand brooding in the centre of the room.

So she could be free then, if she chose.

. . . . . .

With a liquid and envious eye May Julian examined the menu of the second Lyons in the Edgware Road. Spaghetti and Toast, 5d. And she was feeling more than usually hungry. Fivepence was fivepence, though. It would take three minutes to bring the dish, two minutes quite to eat; she had only one hour for lunch, the cleaning of the flat took a good thirty minutes, the flat was quite seven minutes' walk from it. And if she spent fivepence she would have to buy French flowers instead of tulips on Saturday.

And she had so wanted to buy tulips. There were some lovely mauve ones at three and six a bunch in that shop on the left of Chapel Street. Sixpence a day would manage it. And they would last a week. Gwen would be so grateful for them. That was the sweet thing about Gwen. She never took things for granted. Every Saturday when she came back to find the vase on the dressing-table in her bedroom filled with fresh flowers she would throw her head back happily, "My darling," she would say, "how dear of you." And she would put her hand upon your shoulder and as you lifted your face to meet her kiss, it was like a beautiful perfumed flower bending over you. No wonder men were mad about her. But however many lilies and orchids they might shower on her, it was by herself that the bedroom vases were always filled.

She was so sweet and kind to one. And it was lovely in the evening when she came back after her dance or theatre and lay back in the arm-chair, with her arms so white and lovely rested out along the sides, while you sat at her feet, and she told you of all that she had done and seen and said. And if

occasionally she was irritable and snapped at you, what could you expect, with all these men bothering her? And, in a way, it was rather nice to think that you were there for her to snap at when she wanted to; as she couldn't, if there were a maid or charwoman living with her. It was good to get things off your chest. And it would be silly to spend fivepence on spaghetti when you weren't really hungry, and it would mean those silly pansy things instead of tulips, and only twenty minutes to clean the flat in.

Resolutely she beckoned to the waitress.

"Bill, please," she said.

To her surprise Gwen Lawrence was still at home when she returned.

"What, you here!"

"I'm thinking," Gwen answered. "My husband wants to be divorced."

A chill fear laid hold upon May's heart. Divorced. Then Gwen would be free again to marry. And she would leave the flat and they would never see each other again. Still, if it would make Gwen happy. . . .

"How splendid!" she exclaimed, and contrived to make the simulated enthusiasm ring true.

"I'm not sure though," said Gwen, "that I want to."

Not want to. Then they would be still able to live on together. But was it wise of her? Oughtn't she to get free? Wouldn't she be happier that way. . . .

"Don't you want to be free?" she asked.

"If there were anyone to be free for."

"What about that boy," May Julian suggested, "that you met at the dance the other night?"

Gwen Lawrence laughed.

"Graham? Oh, he's like all the rest."

And she described the scene at Christopher's party.

"That boy wants a lesson," she finished, "and I rather think I'm going to give him one."

"But I can't quite see," was May Julian's comment on the incident, "if you are as anxious as you say you are to give this boy what you call 'gip,' why you should have gone to the trouble of saving him from an extremely embarrassing situation."

"If I had shown him up," Gwen explained, "as I very easily could have done, I should only have spoilt one of Christopher's parties; a thing I should have hated to do, because I'm fond of Chris. And further, I shouldn't really have done more than give Graham an uncomfortable half-hour. It was the sort of quarrel that lovers find it easy to make up, that, if anything, draws them closer to one another. That's all that could have happened. So little was at stake. There would have been a brief unpleasantness, and there it would have ended."

"Whereas now?"

"Whereas now, it rather depends upon Graham Moreton himself. There's no need for him ever to see me again if he doesn't want to."

. . . . . .

Which was more or less of what Graham Moreton at that precise moment was endeavouring to convince himself. "You need never see her again, there is no reason why you should. There is every reason why you shouldn't." That was what he was telling himself.

It was of that all day long that he had been trying to convince himself. But all day long tormentingly between his resolution and himself had flickered the distracting memory of Gwen Lawrence's smile as she had said good-bye to him.

A fleeting, ironic smile that had lit the amber eyes with mockery; a smile that invited but did not demand an explanation; that was content, in fact, to go without one.

"Really, but this is all very curious," that smile had said to him. "All very curious, and it's no business of mine to know what it's all about, and I'm

quite prepared to get anyone out of a mess that comes my way. Still, you must admit it's quaint."

All day long he had been unable to clear his memory of that smile.

There had not been a great deal of work for him at the office. A certain number of letters to be answered; a contract or two to be examined; two or three travellers to be interviewed. But not that huge bulk of work that at such a moment he would have welcomed; work that must be attended to, that could not be put aside. Work that he could have taken as a drug to humble memory.

It was work of such a type that he could have wished to have that morning. But there was, to fill six hours' space, definite occupation only for some four of them. The remaining hours were of those so valuable, so essential to the creative worker, the hours in which one makes one's own work, formulates one's own plans; the hours by which the creative worker stands or falls; the hours which Graham had put in the past to such splendid use.

But that was on the other days: the days on which he had in his own life nothing definite to think upon. It was different to-day when tantalizingly between his resolution and himself flickered the memory of that fleeting smile.

He tried to concentrate his attention on the files of the financial news, but the type danced before his eyes. He walked round the office in search of someone similarly situated who would be prepared to discuss some casual detail of policy or routine. But everyone seemed to be weighed under by a bulk of work.

No one was in the mood for conversation. He tried to think out some advertising scheme for the new quick-drying enamel that they would be shortly putting on the market, but the paper lay blank on his desk before him. He began to turn idly the pages of the telephone directory, wondering if there were not some

client or other to whom he might not profitably devote a half-hour's interview. But his fingers stopped turning the pages at the letter L.

Slowly his eye was running down the column. Lawrence, A.; Lawrence, Arthur; Lawrence, Augustus. What curious christenings! Slowly his eye ran on. There it was: Lawrence, Gwen, Mrs., 17a Ciber Crescent, N.W.1., Grosvenor 53282. Near the Edgware Road probably. On his way home, that was to say.

Lifting the speaking-tube, he called down to the main office for a street directory. Ciber Crescent. Yes, there it was—between Edgware Road Station and Marylebone. Ciber Crescent. On his way home.

He leant forward, his head upon his hands. What was this madness that had descended on him? Why was he worrying about this woman? She was nothing to him. He was nothing to her. He had flirted with her in an idle moment, had become involved, through her, in a childishly absurd deception; a deception from which she had very cleverly and very generously saved him. He was, that is to say, in her debt. He owed her a visit of thanks and explanation. "This is how it happened," he should say to her. "You were very kind to me. I must thank you very much." That, obviously, was what he ought to do. She had a right to gratitude and to an explanation.

Why, then, was he hesitating? Why was he working himself into this temper of indecision over what was, after all, a simple act of courtesy? Why did that inner voice continually repeat to him: "Leave it alone. The matter's over. You need never see her again. Get free of it while you can"? Why should he be fretting himself into this condition? She was nothing to him, and he was behaving as though he were in love with her. Which was ridiculous. He was in love with Joan. In a world of women, Joan alone existed for him.

But if he did not go and thank her it would be an insult almost to Joan. It would be a confession of cowardice. Angrily he stifled the warning voice. Angrily refused to listen to it. Leave well alone, indeed. Get free of it while he could, but what was there for him to get free from?

You need never see her again. But when it came to that, there wasn't anyone in the world that one did need to see again. Only there was such a thing as manners.

Resolutely he lifted the receiver of his telephone.

"Put me through to the exchange," he said.

There was a pause.

"Number, please."

"Grosvenor 53282," he answered.

Another pause. Then a listless, impersonal voice: "Hullo!"

"Can I speak to Mrs. Lawrence?"

"Mrs. Lawrence is speaking," the impersonal voice replied.

"Oh, good evening . . . it's Graham Moreton at this end."

There was, or perhaps he fancied there was, a half-second's pause before on an interrogative note the impersonal voice answered, "Yes?"

"I was wondering . . . I wanted . . ." Graham began, then paused. "Might I come and see you some time?" he asked.

"I'm in most evenings," he was told, "between six and seven, if you would care to come and have a cocktail."

"Might I this evening, then?"

"I shall be delighted. At what time?"

"Would half-past five be too early?"

"I shall be delighted to see you then. Good-bye."

Her voice had grown friendlier at the close: friendlier, Graham decided, was the right word. There had been nothing of coquetry in its intonation. Friendliness to a friend, he told himself.

But he had not seen the scornful lift of her lips as she hung back the receiver on its clamp. He did not hear in what a tone she murmured to May Julian:

"There, as I thought! I knew he would!"

CHAPTER VII

LILITH OF OLD

FOUR hours later, on the doorstep of No. 17 Ciber Crescent, Graham Moreton lingered in hesitation.

Again that cautionary voice had begun to whisper to him: "You're quite safe still," it said. "Nothing's happened to you yet. You can go away and send a message. Your fingers have not pressed that bell. What lies on the other side of that door is still unknown to you." Again it whispered, and again scornfully he stifled it.

What was there that could happen to him? This was an ordinary visit to an ordinary acquaintance that meant nothing and could lead nowhere. Firmly he pressed the bell.

The room into which Graham was led seemed to him as curiously impersonal as its owner was individual.

In the corner of the window was a long, polished table on which had been set out a couple of glasses, three or four bottles and a cocktail shaker. Before the fire had been drawn an immense divan sofa, into a corner of which a number of magazines and papers had been tossed carelessly. On the far side of the fireplace beside a large brass standard lamp was a deep brown velveteen-covered chair; the walls had been distempered grey. The black-framed etchings that were evenly spaced along them were such as are to be seen at any reputable exhibition. The window-curtains were a dull red damask, through which shone

here and there, faintly a thread of gold. Taken feature by feature separately, it was well enough. It was not that there were indications of bad taste anywhere; it was just that there were no indications of any taste at all. It was the room of a woman to whom a flat is a headquarters simply, a place that could never bear the impress of personality, or rather whose personality was to be impersonal.

"The cocktails are over there," she remarked as they came into the room. "They're already mixed. You might just give them a shake and pour them out."

Critically she sipped at the pale yellow liquid.

"Um!" she said. "A bit sweet, perhaps; still . . ." She sipped again, then shook her head. "Too much Italian vermuth or too little gin. One of the two. However . . ." And with a quick jerk of her wrist she emptied the glass and handed it across to Graham. There was a pause.

"Well?" she said, and leant backward in her chair.

"I've come to thank you," said Graham quietly. "It was extraordinarily good of you. I've come to thank you, to thank you and to explain."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"It was nothing," she said. "I felt that there was something wrong, something to be acted up to. I just took up my cue. I must say I rather wondered."

"It was like this, you see," and in slow, uncertain sentences he proceeded to explain.

Lying back in the chair, her eyes fixed on him, from time to time nodding her head, Gwen Lawrence listened. She was wearing a loose tea-gown of black georgette; through the thin material the white outline of her arms and shoulders glimmered faintly. From above her the standard lamp cast downwards a spreading triangle of light that divided her sharply from the surrounding twilight.

Looking at her as he spoke, looking into that

isolated patch of colour, everything else in the room appeared to be unreal; the white neck rising from the black gauze of stuff; the head's proud carriage; the high curved forehead in its helmet of brown hair; the soft lips slightly parted, the piercing amber eyes; these alone existed.

"I see," she said at length. "I understand how it came to happen. But it wasn't wise. You should never tell lies about the things that scarcely matter. You should keep your lies for the big occasion. But then, perhaps," she added with a smile, "there isn't going to be one. There may not be, she's nice, that girl of yours."

Then: "I suppose you're frightfully in love with one another."

He flushed and tried not too successfully to laugh away the question.

"Naturally," he said.

"Naturally?" she repeated. "I don't know why you should say naturally. Engaged couples aren't invariably, you know. Engagements are sometimes just things that happen. Like your story about your lunch with me. I rather wondered if it had been like that with you. But then when I saw her—so sweet, so pretty—I thought almost certainly it couldn't be. All the same," she added, "it is curious."

"Curious?" he asked. "What's curious?"

"Nothing," she answered, "nothing. Anyhow, it's the ordinary thing. It's what happens, everywhere. But each time, perhaps it's because I'm not altogether English, each time it a little bit surprises me. You've been engaged, you say, two years?"

"A little longer."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Two years. That, you know, is what surprises me about you English. You meet a girl, you fall wildly in love with her. Life, you say, is going to be impossible without her. She promises to marry you. You become engaged. And then, for eighteen months,

for two years, for three years, nothing happens. This person without whom life is to be impossible, lives in her parents' house and you in yours, and you go to dances together, and to theatres, and you hold hands on your drives back in a taxi, and all the while this grand, overpowering passion goes to sleep, I suppose."

And with a gesture of uncomprehending scepticism she lifted her hands sideways from the chair.

"What else is one to do?" he protested. "One can't marry without money. One has to have a house, furniture, a position. We'd have married the week of our engagement if we could."

"Oh, I know, I know; it's all very right and proper, and the family's the unit of the State. It's the wise and worldly way. But, oh well, I find it a little hard to believe wholeheartedly in these immense passions that can be shut away comfortably in a case for a year or two years, or thirty months; that can be put into cold storage till so much money has been earned or such a position been attained. But, then, perhaps I see love differently."

"And how do you see it?"

"How do I see it?" She hesitated, her head flung backwards, her eyes half closed. "I see it as something wild, untamed, untamable, something that makes its own laws, because it's stronger than all laws. Something that careers are ruined for. Something you can't argue about: that you've got either to accept or to reject. That you can't compromise with; that you've got to take on its own terms or not at all. Something that you can't control; that's not for sale and not for seeking; that comes or goes in its own place and its own season; without warning, without mercy; a thing that destroys life, but that will make it worth the living first. Not a thing that can be preserved in jars."

Slowly, sweetly, out of the spreading angle of light, the rich accents of her voice came to him:

slowly, sweetly, holding him in a stillness, a powerlessness to think or move that was half hypnotic. And when she ceased to speak, he gave such a shudder as patients do when doctors rouse them from a trance.

"But I mustn't keep you from that pretty girl," she laughed. "It was nice of you to come and explain. I was a little curious."

"I can't say how grateful I am to you." He had risen to his feet and was standing beside her. His hand was stretched out to hers in leave-taking. So it was over, then. The little interlude was rounded off. Gratitude had been exchanged, and explanations. They could go their own ways now, free of one another.

"Good-bye," he said; her soft cool fingers were resting against his, the rich, amber-coloured eyes were smiling into his.

Another minute and they would be divided: another minute and the front door would be closed behind him; he would be walking down the steps, into the street and out of her life, as likely as not, for ever. Another minute.

But somehow in that minute's space he had heard his own voice saying:

"And I hope, Mrs. Lawrence, that we'll be seeing one another soon. And I hope very much that I may be able to do something some day in return."

She smiled, a warm, friendly smile.

"I shan't forget," she said, and her fingers for a moment were pressed tightly against his.

"This is my address," he said, and fumbled in his waistcoat pocket for a card.

She nodded.

"Thank you, I won't forget. Oh, and you might jot down your office number."

As Graham walked out into the street he wondered for the fraction of an ironic instant whether an office telephone number was not the twentieth century

equivalent for the garment left by Joseph in a woman's hand.

. . . . . .

Joan and Graham had arranged to meet that evening at seven o'clock in a second-hand bookshop in the Charing Cross Road. They were to dine together in Soho and go to some pictures somewhere afterwards, and as it was only a few minutes after half-past six he decided to walk, at any rate as far as Oxford Circus.

It was a mild spring evening. One of those evenings that startle us in early March with a sense of approaching summer. One of those evenings in which the heart is stirred with a promise of high adventure.

The air was soft, the sky was blue. Caressingly on roofs and chimney-stacks lingered the diffused radiance of a fading sunset. A faint mist of green mantled the tall trees and shrubberies of the park. There was a lightness in the tread of the old men walking southwards towards their clubs. A reckless gaiety on the faces of the shop girls as they hurried, laughing together, homewards.

Ah, but it was a good world; a good world to be young in, a good world to be in love in, a good world where out of the luminous sun-shot haze of a March evening you could step into the cool quiet of a London bookshop, to find waiting for you there a face that brightened at your coming, a clear toned voice that said, "Ah, darling!" and a smothered broken little laugh in answer to your whispered, "If I could only kiss you here."

Happily, her hand upon his arm, they passed across Cambridge Circus into the stiller reaches of Soho.

"Where are we going?" she asked; "to Iso's?"

He nodded.

"I've booked our usual table."

It was the first restaurant at which they had ever dined together. He had taken her there because it had been small and good and cheap; because he had very little money and a great deal to say to her. It had

prospered, however, during the intervening months. It was larger now and quite expensive, but he had more money and less need, perhaps, for privacy. At any rate, as often as not, they went there when they dined together.

Their usual table was in the front of the room and in a corner. They had gone there in the first place because in early days, when the staff was smaller, communication with the kitchens had been effected by a lift that emerged unexpectedly out of the centre of the floor. "Do let's sit here," Joan had said. "It'll be such fun to see all the dishes coming up." For the lift's sake they had gone there, and also because from that table they had a good view of the succession of paintings that decorated the opposite wall of the room. The lift had been superseded, but the pictures stayed.

"I must tell you, darling, so exciting," Joan was saying. "Mother's just come back from staying with Uncle John. And he told her that he was going to give us his Queen Anne bookcase for a wedding-present. It's a heavenly thing. You'll love it—great glass doors."

The cheeks were flushed, and the cornflower-blue eyes were alight with eagerness.

"It's sweet of him, isn't it?" she said. "The only thing is that I don't know how we shall be able to get it into any room that we shall be ever able to afford. I'm not sure that we shan't have to take a studio.

"Not that that wouldn't be rather fun," she added thoughtfully. "We could give awfully jolly parties if we had a studio. That's the worst of a flat or a small house; the rooms aren't big enough for parties. Not parties like Christopher Stirling's, at least. And those are the only sort that are really fun. Don't you think cocktail parties before dinner would be a good idea? A six to seven show. It's the sort of time when everyone's at a loose end."

Gaily, rapidly, she chattered on, her face sparkling

with happiness and animation. But as Graham listened, slowly, unwillingly, a nameless melancholy, the reaction from his mood of earlier elation, rose in him. All this talk of furniture and parties; this settling down and getting one's friends round one; wasn't there something somewhere more than this? Was it inevitable that this should be the destined end of so much promise of high adventure? "Something wild, untamed, untamable——" What was it that that woman had said to him? "Something that you can't control, something that's neither for sale nor seeking." Where was it, the glow, the thrill, the mystery of life?

His eyes rested on a painted panel across the room of a woman in a wide black hat, her head thrown back, her eyes half closed, stretching upwards towards a butterfly that hovered tantalizingly above her lips. A symbol of life, perhaps, that scarlet butterfly denying the red mouth's kiss; and a queer loneliness and melancholy engulfed him; a sense that he was missing something, that some rare quality of emotion had looked at him, to pass by upon the other side.

. . . . . .

The film to which Graham took Joan that evening intensified this sensation of unattained fulfilment. It was a Puritanian story of politics and swords and love. A ridiculous story enough, he realized. Life was not like that; never had been probably, and never would be. And yet would such tales, he asked himself, be written if men and women were not dimly conscious that life could be, that life ought to be, like that; if they did not feel that somewhere buried within themselves was that which, properly directed, might win to that fullness of emotion?

In silence they rode homewards through the gleaming, emptying streets. On the threshold of Joan's house they hesitated. There was no rim of light against the high-curtained windows of the drawing-room.

"They've gone to bed," said Joan; "come in for a second and get warm."

In silence he followed her through the hall, upstairs, along the passage, into the drawing-room.

The fire in the grate had not yet burnt down, and the red heap of coal filled the room with a dull, warm glow that lit here and there the brass handle of a cabinet, burnishing an occasional thread of gold in chair cover and cushion.

With a quick movement of her wrist Joan pulled off the small felt hat, flung it carelessly upon a chair, and tossed back from her forehead the mane of yellow hair. Her eyes through the half light of the room were fiercely bright, and on the half-parted lips glinted a film of moisture.

"Darling!" she murmured, "darling."

It was their first kiss that evening, and as the cool, soft arms went slowly round his neck, as the powdered fragrance from her neck and hair rose troublingly about him, as he felt her lift herself upon her toes so that her mouth might be pressed the harder upon his, as over the smouldering eyes the long-lashed eyelids closed, slowly drop by drop his resentment and impatience ebbed from him.

Cheek against cheek they sat for a long while, whispering before the sinking fire. Her yellow hair was dyed by the light from the glowing coals to a dull copper. Dark shadows rimmed her eyes, the soft colouring of her cheeks had deepened. Ah, but he loved her so.

"If only I hadn't got to leave you," he said. "It's cruel that on such an evening one should have to part."

She said nothing, made no sign, just sat there, her hands clasped before her knees.

"It's cruel," he repeated, "it's cruel, and it's because I want you so, because I so hate to be away from you that I'm impatient at times and irritable. It maddens me, the thought of our not being everything to each other. You'll understand when I'm like that, won't you? You'll know why it is? It's not easy, this

long waiting. I'd be so much more the perfect lover if I didn't love you so."

She made no answer, but quietly her hand was stretched out to his.

. . . . . .

It was a cool, starlit, moonless night. The tubes and buses had stopped running. The disused streets shone like dark glaciers in the reflected lamplight.

A good evening for a three-mile walk: a walk that would clear his mind of the day's confused impressions. His agitated indecision at the office, his talk with Mrs. Lawrence, the elation with which he had walked back from her flat to Oxford Circus. The elation that had changed suddenly to an engulfing melancholy: the entranced happiness of that last hour in the fire-lit drawing-room: the long, breathless kisses.

How he loved her! loved her more, far more, than he had loved her on that evening when he had for the first time kissed her. And in all conscience he had loved her enough then. She had been the first girl that he had ever kissed. Curious to think of it. That he should have come to the age of twenty-five without kissing a single girl.

But he had gone straight from school into the war: his years of service had been spent in France and away from London. The moment he had been demobilized he had gone up to Oxford for a couple of years, to an exclusively masculine society. And then almost immediately after coming down he had met Joan, and after that—well, after that, of course, no one else had mattered. There had been nobody but Joan.

And in so few months now they would be married. He ought to be happy, radiantly happy. And yet, and yet . . .

"Something wild, untamed, untamable——" slowly, insidiously the words were repeated in his ear. Slowly, insidiously before his eyes out of a spreading triangle of light from a dead white face clasped round by a helmet of brown hair. "Something wild, untamed,

untamable, something that makes its own laws, because it is stronger than all laws, something that you can't control, that may destroy life but will make it worth the living first."

In the upper windows of an occasional house a light was burning still. There was the love that could be preserved in cases; there was the docile, ordered, civilized commodity: and it was to that that his love and Joan's would come eventually; had already come, perhaps, since it had adjusted itself to their conditions, come to them on their terms.

And he felt suddenly an overwhelming, heart-breaking nostalgia for that other love, the something wild, untamed, untamable, the something for which ships had been sunk and cities sacked. The thing of which Gwen Lawrence in that calm, controlled, infinitely disquieting voice had spoken.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PRICE OF VIRTUE

"A LITTLE cooler, sir?"

Guy Fortescue nodded his head, and the innumerable jets of tepid water from the curved zinc pedestal chilled slowly to a stinging cold. With a shudder he stepped out of range. To his left and in front of him stretched forbiddingly the clear waters of the plunge; through the glass wall over his right shoulder stretched the warm chambers of eternal heat. How happy and contented they looked there, lying back with their closed eyes and folded hands and dripping foreheads, the striped towels hanging loosely on their knees. How utter the tranquillity before lunch time of a Turkish bath; how complete a suspension of all effort. How fair a contrast to that ominously unruffled expanse of water.

Interrogatively the masseur looked at him.

"The plunge, sir?"

With a jerk, Guy Fortescue pulled himself together.

"Of course," he answered.

It was worse than he had expected. Gasping and shivering with water in his eyes and mouth, he scrambled up the slippery marble steps.

"Most gentlemen begin to think twice about the plunge at your age, sir," said the man as he wrapped the warm, large towel round him.

At his age! And it seemed such a little while ago that he had been brought here by John Featherway and Archie Gammell, and had felt genially contemptuous of

their shuddering avoidance of the plunge. In retrospect so little a while ago, but actually in days and months . . .

The years went so fast when you had once turned the corner, when you found yourself in the straight road, when there were no new events to mark the swift days' passage. So little a while ago. But John Featherway was dead, and the green seats of the park no longer saw the stately figure of Archie Gammell threading its way between them on Sunday mornings after church. While himself, with two married daughters, and a son at Oxford . . . How swiftly the pages of the book were turned. With his arm crossed behind his head, he lay back on the narrow plush couch and brooded moodily. Youth went and in its turn life likewise.

To be old and out of it! To see through your bedroom window the soft-hued marvel of an April day; to feel on your cheek and draw into your lungs the deep breath of awakening life; to recognize unchanged about you the familiar and loved landscape that you had known in boyhood; and to know that soon, soon, on some near or later day, the same sun would be rising over the same hills, to shed on these same lanes and cottages its gentle radiance, and you not there to look on it! . . . It seemed only yesterday that he had been "young Fortescue"; and here he was now in middle-age, timorous of cold water.

To be old and out of it! Already, for all he knew, people were beginning to treat him with dreary intolerance, making behind his back contemptuous allowances for age. "Poor old man." Was that now what he was becoming to them? A silly old man, to be played with, and made use of. Was that the rôle he was playing in Gwen's life? Angrily the line of thought passed through him. Let her think it, if she chose. He wasn't "gaga" yet.

It was in a dark and clouded state of mind that he was driven round to Ciber Crescent.

For a full four minutes he was kept waiting on the doorstep.

"I'm so sorry," she explained. "I was telephoning."

"Who to?"

"Nobody you know," she answered.

They had scarcely left the hall before again the bell of the telephone began to ring.

"What a life," Gwen murmured.

"Hullo, what is it? Yes, this is Grosvenor 53282. Yes. It's Mrs. Lawrence speaking. Who is that? What? Oh, but, my dear, how are you? And to think that I didn't recognize your voice; that only shows how long it must be since I heard it. You've been neglecting me, Ralph. Oh, yes, quite seriously; of course I'm offended. And when am I going to see you again? Thursday? No, I'm afraid I couldn't manage Thursday. Friday I can. Yes? Then you'll call for me at eight. Splendid. Good-bye, my dear."

"And now, Guy," she said, turning round to face him, "we can decide where you're going to give me lunch."

Guy Fortescue made no reply. There was a surly, impatient expression on his face, All these men rushing through her life; these men of whom he knew so little, who played in her life he didn't know what part.

"If you'll just wait half a second," she said, "I'll get my hat on."

But he had stepped quickly across the room to stand between her and the door.

"No," he said, "no, not for a moment. There's something that's got to be said between us first."

She raised her eyebrows.

"So?" she said. "And must lunch be kept waiting for it?"

"Yes," he blustered angrily. "It is important. I'm through with it. That's what I've got to tell you.

I'm through with it. It can't go on any longer. I've had enough."

"And of what, Guy Fortescue, have you had enough?" Her voice was controlled and calm, but beneath her words there was the chill of steel.

"Of this. Of everything. Of you and me. Of all these men that you keep hanging round you. I've had enough, I say. I'm through with it."

Very straight, with fearless, unwavering eyes, she looked him in the face. Then slowly she nodded her head.

"I see," she said. "I understand," and turning, she walked over to the mantelpiece, lifted the lid of a small painted wooden box, took from it a cigarette, and stood there tapping slowly the point of the cigarette against her thumb. She said nothing. Just stood there, tapping.

In the centre of the room Guy Fortescue shifted his feet uncomfortably. He had expected her to protest and plead, to explain and whimper and cajole; cajole till he should be magnanimous and forgive. He was unprepared for this disarming silence that forced upon him instead of her the onus of an explanation.

"You see——" he began awkwardly.

But she cut him short.

"Oh no, please. I understand perfectly," and turning, her arms stretched behind her along the mantelpiece, she looked him in the face. "I understand perfectly," she said. "We've known each other for three months now. We've been seeing each other two or three times a week. You have taken me to a number of theatres and a number of dances. You have made me a number of very generous presents. The time has come, you think, to present your bill. Oh no, don't interrupt. I don't blame you. I must have seemed, I know, what you are pleased to call 'fair game.' A grass widow, with not a great deal of money, and a great deal too much spare time. You set out to buy me. Oh yes, you did, Guy Fortescue. You set out

to buy me with dinners and frocks and dances. And now that you have begun to suspect that you have made a bad investment, you say you're through, that you've tired of it. Well, so be it. If you'll just wait a moment I will go and fetch the various things that you have given me. You can take them away with you, and I shall wish to see neither you nor them again. You will let me pass now, thank you."

And without looking at him, with a firm, steady stride she walked out of the drawing-room, across the passage, into the bedroom.

In less than three minutes she was in the room, her arms laden with frocks and boxes. One by one she laid them upon the table.

"That's all, I believe," she said at last.

Her voice was calm and level-toned; in her eyes was the old glint of ironic mockery, and in the corners of her mouth a smile was flickering. How simple it all was, she told herself; how easy a game to play. Slowly the swell of Guy Fortescue's anger subsided. He was embarrassed now; unhappy and ashamed; appalled by the consequences of his moment's outburst; by the implied finality of that high-heaped pile upon the table.

"But Gwen," he began to stammer, "really, I—I d-didn't mean that. I'm sorry, Gwen."

Fearless and unwavering as ever, her eyes met his.

"I, too," she answered. "I'm sorry: more perhaps than you are. More perhaps than you'll ever realize."

There was a pause; an electric, nervous pause.

"Well, and aren't you going to take those things away?" she asked.

He shook his head miserably.

"I can't—I—it's, I mean—oh, I don't know—I can't. They are yours. I got them for you. They mean—oh, but I couldn't, you've misunderstood me."

She shook her head.

"Oh no, my dear. Not now. Once I may have.

But not now; believe me, not any longer. Once I thought—but it doesn't matter what I thought. There are the things," and she stretched out her hand, her small white hand, towards the table. "You'd better take them. Or will you send your man round? I'll make them up in a parcel for him."

But Guy Fortescue was beyond the reach of irony. He was conscious only of the loss so imminent of Gwen Lawrence, and of all that for the last three months she had stood for in his life.

"Gwen dear," he stammered, "you 'thought once.' What did you mean by that, that you had thought once?"

Her hands clasped behind her back, her head flung backwards, in a still level voice she answered him.

"I thought once—but what does it matter what I thought? It was silly of me to think it. I thought perhaps that you were what for all my life I had been looking. A real friend. A man who liked me for what I was; who was kind to me simply because he liked me. It's what I've been looking for, what I've missed, you see. Life isn't easy for my sort of woman, a married woman whose husband's left her—there are a good many vultures hovering about the spoil. I thought once that you were different. If I hadn't thought it I'd never have let you give me all those things."

And turning away she walked over to the mantelpiece, and lighting a match held it to the cigarette that a few minutes earlier she had tapped with such slow, rhythmic movements against her thumb.

There was no need to look at him. It was a stratagem that had never failed.

Between them on the table lay the pile of frocks and boxes. Once, and for a moment Guy Fortescue looked at it, then, with a quick step he was beside the bending figure at the mantelpiece, with a wild flood of words upon his lips.

"Forgive me, I've been a brute," he cried. "I

wasn't myself that moment. I was jealous and irritable and impatient. I care so much for you. I so want to be your friend; your one friend, the friend that you'll turn to first when you're in trouble. And I can't help feeling jealous sometimes of all those other men—those men of whom I know nothing, with whom you spend all the time that you're not with me. You can't blame me if I'm jealous sometimes."

Slowly her head was shaken.

"You needn't have been," she said. "They mean little enough to me; they're just things that I pass empty hours with. They come and go. The Ralph Bowers and all the rest. And all the time I have to be on my guard with them, watching them. That's why I was so proud, so happy in our friendship. I could be myself with you; I hadn't to be watching. I was mistaken, but—oh, well, I was happy in my mistake. I've that at least to be grateful for."

"You weren't mistaken," in a cry, abrupt and pleading, he had answered her. There was nothing left now of his jealousy and anger, nothing but shame and the fear of losing her. "Forget that moment, forget it and forgive. I wasn't myself then. Let's go back to what we were; let's forget it ever happened."

A slightly pathetic figure, he stood beside her, this ageing, but still not unhandsome man; pathetic in his fear and his abasement; pathetic and, in a way, undignified. And it was to spare his dignity, perhaps, that the glint of mockery returned to light tauntingly the golden amber of Gwen Lawrence's eyes.

"As we were before, as though nothing had happened," she said. "Then there mustn't be any repeat performance, Guy."

But she wouldn't listen to his protestation. A slim white hand was lifted before his face to stay him.

"No, no," she said. "You've kept me waiting quite long enough for lunch already."

Six hours later, as she sat polishing her nails before

the mirror, Gwen Lawrence described the details of the encounter for May Julian's benefit.

"By appealing to man's baser instincts," she concluded, "you can feather your nest pretty comfortably for ten weeks, but you've got to appeal to what he calls his nobler nature if you want to keep him as I'm proposing to keep Guy Fortescue, for twice as many months."

Stretched back at full length on the high-heaped cushioned ottoman, her hands clasped behind her head, May Julian watched through half-closed eyes the smoke of her cigarette rise in a slim wavering line towards the ceiling.

"And it ended quite happily?" she asked.

"It ended, my dear, in that," and Gwen Lawrence lifted from her dressing-table a gold and enamel snuff-box. "Catch," she said and tossed it over. "Rather divine, darling, don't you think?"

May Julian turned it over between her fingers.

"You're an expensive ornament," was her comment on it.

Gwen Lawrence shrugged her shoulders.

"He thinks I'm worth it, and perhaps I am worth it," she added. "Love is with that sort of man, nine parts of it selfishness. It's a drug to cheat him into a favourable opinion of himself. It would flatter his vanity, of course, if I were to fall in love with him. But not for so very long. It would only mean that I had come down to his level. It flatters him far more if I can contrive to place myself upon a pedestal and pull him up to me; which is what I have done with Guy. Can't you picture him," she laughed, "indulging this evening in an orgy of self-esteem. 'I am not as other men,' I can hear him saying. 'I am capable of a pure and disinterested friendship for a young and unprotected woman. Where other men love only with their bodies, I can love with my intelligence, my mind, my soul.'" She smiled ironically. "Can't you see how he'll preen himself,

my dear? And now that I've put him on that pedestal he won't dare come down from it. He won't dare to confess that he's only like other men after all. Oh, yes," she laughed, "men are easy enough to handle when you've learnt the way. Or, rather," she added, "when you've ceased to care. In the meantime, though, you can tell me what I'm to wear to-night."

And rising from her chair, she flung open the doors of her wardrobe and stood back to survey the long, many-coloured row.

"I know them all so well," she said, "that's the worst of going out every night. I rather wish Guy had given me a dress instead of that enamel box. I suppose it'll have to be that blue-black marocain again, or the silver tissue. What do you think, darling?"

"Depends where you're going," was May Julian's answer.

"Don't know. I'm being called for."

"Who by?"

"A crowd. This frock, though, what do you think about it?"

May Julian was for once, however, not over interested in the details of her friend's arrayal.

"That lawyer man," she asked, "have you decided anything? Are you going to let the divorce go through?"

Gwen Lawrence shrugged her shoulders.

"I've worn this dress," she said, "at least six times since Christmas."

From the latch of the wardrobe door hung suspended from its hanger, a shimmering sheath of silver tissue. "Six or it may be seven," she murmured, "still, with an orchid or two upon the shoulder . . . ?" Critically, dubiously, she surveyed its worn perfections, while the flow of May Julian's commentaries continued.

"In a way, of course, it would be rather jolly," she was saying, "to be free. If, that is to say, there were inducements for you to marry again. Life must be so

fearfully amusing as it is. So many new things to do, so many new places to see. These dances and parties and theatres, and with one husband only to be taken out by, it would all have to stop, I suppose. Of course, if there were someone fabulously rich. . . ."

Her eyes were bright and her lips were parted and there was a glow in her pale face, as phrase by phrase she built up for herself the concept of a world so different from her own.

"Don't you think so, Gwen?"

Gwen Lawrence had not shifted from her position before the wardrobe.

"It'll have," she said, "I'm afraid, to be the marocain."

There was a clatter of feet upon the stairs and a series of rings upon the bell.

"Ah, the crowd," she said. "So soon. Let them in, May, there's a dear."

But already May Julian was half-way across the room.

From the hall came a babble of voices.

"Not ready? Why, of course she isn't," one of the men was saying. "Whoever expected her to be? We're only five minutes late ourselves. Come along, children, and let's see if there're any cocktails for us. We're dining, Gwen," he shouted, "at the Clarion. Archie's show. I tried to beat him up to Rumpelstein's but he says he's signed too many bills already there."

"And as my brother's just settled his affair at the Clarion . . ."

"Certainly, Archie, certainly: the Clarion it shall be. In the meantime will someone tell me who's giving the dance we're going to to-night?"

"Haven't the foggiest," the answer came. "Molly Cranston told me to keep this evening open, and to bring some folk and get taken on with her crowd somewhere. That's all I know about it."

"Which is about all," the first speaker murmured,

" one ever does know nowadays about a dance. The only difference I can see between dancing at private houses and hotels, is that at one you pay and the other you don't."

Gwen Lawrence had taken no part in the conversation, although she had heard through the open doorway the greater part of it. Dress after dress had been lifted from the wardrobe to be eyed distrustfully and discarded.

" It's hopeless," she said at last. " I'll have to have some more dresses."

From the sitting-room came the rattle of a cocktail shaker.

" That's right," someone was advising. " Now over, two to the right, a circular motion now. That's it. Old Eli at the Sandwich taught me; 'a shook a good bronx, did Eli."

Brightly, noisily, the stream of chatter flowed. Silent before the mirror Gwen Lawrence smoothed back the soft creamed surface of her cheeks; passed slowly along her mouth a painted forefinger till her lips were the magenta petals of some tropical and velvet flower; drew carefully the short black pencil beneath her eyes.

To be free! Freedom. That thing so many hungered for. It was hers for the asking now.

How she would have welcomed this opportunity five years ago. How she would have welcomed it in those tear-stained days that had followed Eric's desertion of her. Marriage had seemed then the only door back to the life she was accustomed to: the life of ease and leisure, ornament and display: not a substantial life perhaps, but the life anyhow she had been born to. And you had no right to blame a plant because it could grow only in certain soils.

Her friends and relations had advocated self-righteously a life of vigorous economy. She must sell her furniture and give up her flat. She must learn typewriting and shorthand. They had friends in the

city who would find some opening for her. But even while they spoke, she had realized the impossibility of such a life for her, had realized it in the recurrence of that one regret, "I'm not free even to marry again." There was one way only after all in which a woman such as herself could create about her the setting she required.

"There's only one way for my sort of woman," she had told herself. "And that is through men. If not in marriage then in other ways."

And because she had known that men will spend money only upon what is costly, she had not taken a smaller but a larger flat; she had not bought fewer but more dresses, she had not gone out less but more; had never hesitated to accept invitations that would involve her in expenses; had cut heavily during those first weeks of self-establishment into her capital. And in every respect justifiably. Within three months she had worked herself into a position where it would be unnecessary for her ever to pay for another meal herself, and scarcely a single dress. And in the savage hours when she felt bitterest against men, there was assuagement in the thought of how little she had given in return; in all those months hardly a dozen kisses; and those not to the men who had given most to her.

To what purpose could she put her freedom now? To marry again? There was something to be said for it. If she were fearfully in love of course, or if, as May Julian had said, there were to come into her life somebody fabulously rich, or if, which May Julian did not realize, someone were to be frightfully disinterestedly in love with her. For that, she knew, was the weak point in her woman's armour. If she were to be loved by a man, not for the man's sake but for her own.

But she was unlikely to fall in love again; sufficiently, at any rate, to wish to yield her liberty. There were more millionaires in fiction than in life, and who out

of all the men she knew was there to care for her unselfishly? Sometimes she might feel bitter against Guy Fortescue, against his vanity and obtuseness, against his merchant's attitude that in love as in commerce, value must be given for goods received, but he was, she knew, no worse really than the rest: than the so many others for whom women existed as entertainments, to be bought like stalls in a theatre. And when occasionally you met a boy like Graham Moreton, who seemed momentarily a little different, how soon he managed to prove himself like all the rest.

To be free again. Yes, if there was anyone to be free for. But if there weren't, and if the fact of being free were to prejudice one's scope. For there was that possibility. She remembered what Guy had said of the poor man's gallantries: of the advantages of not being taken at one's word. Might not that theory of his act conversely? Might it not be that men who were in danger of being taken at their word only made love to those women who were not in a position to take them at it? And what woman was less in a position to take them at it than the grass widow? Was the secret of her own power over men the knowledge that she was not in a position to make trial of their fervour? Would men, if there were not a husband in the background of her life, be in quite such a hurry to protest their readiness to serve her for a lifetime? Would they not rather be on their guard. Would they not say, "Here's a woman who's looking for a husband," and would they not in consequence shirk that first invitation that is the prelude to so many others? Might not a husband be rather a good property piece stuck away there in the background? Of all the men she knew was there one for whose sake she could wish her freedom; and if there was not, what likelihood was there of her ever meeting a man for whom she would? While if her freedom was likely to hold men in check . . .

Oh no, she was better tied, and there was amusement enough to be found in the passing days.

From the inner room a voice was raised in querulous complaint. "When is Gwen going to be ready? I've finished my second cocktail and I'm abominably thirsty."

CHAPTER IX

THE REWARDS OF BEAUTY

THE last nail had been hammered into the pale primrose wallpaper. The last vase set in place on the rosewood cabinet. The last shred of the last packing-case swept from the thick pile of fawn-grey carpet. With a little sigh of happiness Mildred Atkinson lifted her hands behind her head and turned slowly round to gaze with wondering eyes on the flat that had become hers.

It was like a chapter out of a fairy tale. Three weeks ago, morning after morning she had been hurrying at nine o'clock down the chill stone steps of the immense bleak house in Camberwell, where with seventy other girls she received in return for three-quarters of her weekly wage a strip of partitioned passage that housed a bed, a breakfast of weak coffee, and leanless bacon, and at half-past six a high tea of marmalade and ham and eggs. Three weeks ago, morning after morning, between half-past nine and eleven she had dusted and cleaned and polished; staining her nails and hardening her hands; three weeks ago through day after lagging day in that heated air under the strain of artificial lights, with bright eyes and double-edged retort she had cajoled the tips that were both an offering and an invitation. All day long, as she laughed and chattered between the alcoved tables, she was conscious of hot glances focusing upon her their restless appetites. And then afterwards, night after night, limp and a little dazed

with eyes that had grown weak in twilight, she had pressed and fought her way by tube and bus to the long bare tables where seventy girls silent and exhausted ate with the resentful concentration of a hunger that is unseemingly appeased, the margarined bread, the salted ham, the cool and congealing eggs.

Only three weeks ago. It had happened, all of it, so quickly that she could scarcely reconstruct the intermediary steps by which the Mildred Atkinson who had scrubbed floors and shivered in cold bedrooms had become the Mildred Atkinson with a banking account, credit at Reville, and a flat in Mount Street. It was like a chapter out of a fairy tale; the noise of the cocktail party, the quiet of the Ritz, the twilit kisses of that long afternoon. And then the rush to Camberwell, the hurried packing, the transportation of her few possessions to the hotel suite that had seemed then so opulent and now so tawdry; the interviews with house agents and decorators: that marvellous morning when mannequin after mannequin had passed before her, and through a mist she had heard Humphrey saying: "Don't you think that rather suits you, dear? We'd better have that, too, I think!" The three hectic days when carpets were going down and curtains going up, and it had seemed impossible that this anthology of noise and dust could ever become a home.

In three weeks, all of it! And in an hour's time Humphrey would be calling for her; they were to dine at Ciro's, the glass door outside which she had lingered enviously so often would swing open; like a mantle the kindly and scented heat would be cast over her. As she walked beside Humphrey into the dining-rooms with the gold and beaded flounces of her frock rustling against her knees, she would be conscious from the cushioned seats about the room of the hot glances of appraising men: no longer though to revolt her and weary her; no longer was she subject to their need of her; no longer a thing to have florins tossed

at. They were a ladder she had made use of and could kick away.

In an hour's time he would be calling for her. It would be the first time that he had seen the flat since the carpets had gone down. In the last four days she had refused to let him come. "No," she had said, "no. You've seen it looking like a rabbit warren. You shan't see it again till it's finished." And as she turned slowly round, letting her eyes pass from one object to another: the pale primrose wallpaper, the faint lilac ceiling, the thick fawn-grey carpet, the round walnut table, with its low bowl of mauve-grey tulips, the gilt-framed mezzotints, the deep cushioned chairs with their silver-shot damask coverings, she smiled with the quiet pride of the artist who is conscious of success.

And the bedroom: she would be able, she felt, to lie entranced for hours watching the brave splash of colour that her dressing-table with its three-sided mirror and its array of pots and powder puffs and bottles made against the dull gold of the wallpaper. With a little laugh, she clapped her hands together. How marvellously happy she was going to be.

. . . . . .

With a series of little splashes the hard Houbigaut crystals were scattered upon the warm and steaming water. For a moment they lay, some clear and transparent, others yellow and opaque, on the white enamel of the bath. Then as above them the ruffled surface became smooth, slowly the water clouded with their essence. Luxuriatingly Mildred Atkinson drew into her lungs the scent of Chypre.

How soft, how velvet soft the perfumed water that lapped in tired ripples against her arms and neck. How comforting to know that before the high heaped bedroom fire the soft flakes of an immense towel were slowly warming; how restful the knowledge that there were no hard knuckles to rap upon the door, reminding her that in ninety seconds her ten minutes would be up. Time, like comfort, was for sale.

She had left the door of her bedroom open so that she could watch as she stretched back in the cooling water the wavering shadows upon the ceiling; the glint of the firelight on the gleaming mahogany of the vast low bedstead; the gilt frames upon the wall; so that she could see in its enamel casket upon the mantelpiece the minute hand of the clock move round to twelve.

Not that she was in any hurry. Humphrey would be calling for her at eight, but the later one dined the better. Ciro's, her customers used to tell her, did not really begin to be amusing before ten. And it was so pleasant here in this new-found twilit warmth. Lazily she lifted herself out of the cooling water. How marvellous it was not to be chilled by that first surrendering of one's body to the air, to be able without hurry to let one's toes search for the fur-lined moccasins, to scamper dripping over the thick carpets to the heated towel, to sit huddled in its toasted whiteness before the deep and reddening glow.

Above her on the mantelpiece the hand of the clock moved slowly round. It was time for her to begin dressing, she supposed. With a quick droop of her shoulders she let the white tent fall away from her, and raised herself upon her hands. But she was indisposed to action; she was so happy; so at peace. She kicked away her slippers and on bare feet walked over to the wardrobe. With her fingers upon the door she hesitated.

There in the long sheet of glass she stood reflected. It was practically the first time in her life that she had looked at the smooth white body, with its wide hips and breasts that were inverted cups of ivory; and a smile came into her eyes that was less of pride than gratitude, as though that curved loveliness before her was not perhaps so much a possession of her own as a kindly ally that would one day fail her, but that now and for a space of years would spread before her the rich rewards of beauty; as though her smile were an

acknowledgement of her indebtedness, as though she was thanking this white familiar for the warmth, the comfort, the leisure it had brought to her; thanking it and at the same time begging it to postpone till the last hour the ultimate, the inevitable betrayal.

In the hall beyond the bell of the front door rang shrilly.

"Heavens!" she thought. "Humphrey already."

And pulling a silk wrap round her, she ran out into the passage.

CHAPTER X

HOW THINGS DEVELOP

GWEN LAWRENCE was feeling bored. It was a state of mind in which she had surprised herself with increasing frequency during the last few weeks. Not only was she not particularly enjoying the things that she was doing; but she could not think of anything to do that would amuse her more. And that, she was the first to admit, was a highly unsatisfactory state of things.

It was half an hour since she had finished dressing. She was not due at the Embassy till half-past one. There was an interval of two hours to be filled. And she could think of nothing with which to fill it. There was no one she wanted to see, and not a great many people that she would have been able to, had she wanted. Her female acquaintance was restricted. And the majority of her men friends, during the morning, at any rate, were engaged by some form of occupation.

She could go down, of course, to The Times Book Club and change her books. But there was nothing that she wanted particularly to read. She had read the dozen or so odd novels that were being talked about. And novels existed for her solely as topics of conversation.

She could, of course, spend an hour or so in the Brompton Arcade over the choice of a new evening frock. But she had spent a good deal on clothes during the last month one way or another. She had

all the dresses that she strictly needed. And if Guy was going to give her presents, they might just as well be things that could be converted into practical capital when the ultimate shipwreck came.

An interval of two hours, and with no means of filling it. And in two hours' time even there would be nothing that she would be justified in looking forward to with the least excitement. A lunch at the Embassy—just such another lunch as she had had on Wednesday and would have on Friday.

She would fidget her way through a number of highly-flavoured courses: high-flavoured because to her crowd eating was an affair not of appetite but of palate. You could not feel hungry when there was never an interval of more than three hours between one meal and the next.

And all the time there would be the strain of entertaining Guy.

They would discuss the qualities and defects of the particular night club to which they had been on the previous evening. They would criticize the band and approve the cabaret. They would decide on the theatre they were to go to on the following evening. They would exchange such scandal about prominent persons as might have come their way: as she had done at so many other lunches, and with so many other men.

Heaven, but it was dull, dull, dull.

Moodily she looked through the window upon the street. Out of a blue sky, across which small dove-coloured clouds were drifting lazily, the sun shone with the uncertain radiance of an April morning. How many hearts on such a day would not be thrilled and gladdened by the promise of sun-drenched hours that stretched for them towards the fair day's close?

But for her it scarcely mattered whether the sky was clear or clouded, whether it was rain or sun that slanted on to that long expanse of roof: one day was like another: a repetition of the same effects—one restaurant

or another, one theatre or another, one night club or another. There was no difference, no essential difference between them. They were built on the same pattern equally with the men who took her to them.

The trouble was, of course, she knew, that in her life the sauces that should flavour a substantial dish had become the entire meal. A succession of decorations with nothing for them to decorate. It was a dangerous road to follow. For what after all was heroin but the flavouring of a flavour, the gilding of a decoration? As cabarets stood to offices, so heroin stood to cabarets. And for her cabarets and restaurants, cocktails and dances and theatres, had become the equivalent of the average man's office life, had become actually her profession, the means through which she won her livelihood, and contrast one had to have. One could not manage without periodic heightenings of tension. And she had none. That was the trouble.

Moodily she stared out of the window. She must if she were to keep sane, contrive to create some variety in her life.

. . . . . .

It was the outcome of such speculations that caused at about half-past eleven on the following morning the telephone bell to ring at Graham's elbow.

"Yes," he said, "Graham Moreton speaking, who is that?"

From the other end of the telephone came a light, ironic laugh.

"Really, how business-like that sounds. I hardly dare to speak to you now."

It was a feminine and familiar voice. Unplaceable for the moment.

"I'm afraid——" he began tentatively, but she cut him short.

"Of course," she said. "I never expected you to know. It's only the second time you've spoken to me across a telephone. Gwen Lawrence," she informed him.

"Oh, Mrs. Lawrence." From the sound of his reply it was not possible for her to tell whether he was pleased or sorry. That he was surprised though, and excited, that was obvious.

"I suppose," she said, "I ought not to be ringing you up in the middle of the morning's work."

"My work's not so important as all that," he laughed.

"And in a way, you see," she continued, "it's about business that I'm ringing you up. Oh, no, no, not your business: mine. I was thinking that I'd rather like to invest some money, or rather gamble with some money. And as it was you, in a way, that put the idea into my head with that absurd misunderstanding we got landed into, and as I know nothing about brokers, and less about shares, and you, I presume, know a little about both, I thought I might do worse than ask your advice about it."

He would be delighted, he replied.

"Then perhaps you will come and have another cocktail with me this evening. You can? Admirable. Thank you so much, Mr. Moreton."

He found her talking on the telephone when he arrived.

"Who is that? What? Oh yes, Arthur Everest," she was saying. "Can I dine with you on Friday? No, I'm afraid I can't on Friday. No, nor Wednesday. I'm afraid I'm pretty well booked up all this week. The one after? Well, I'm rather thinking of going out of London for a day or two. My dear man, that's rather like making a date in the next world. I really can't. Ten days at the outside is all my head will carry. Of course I don't keep a diary! I expect my friends to remember my engagements. Ring me up in about three weeks' time. Good-bye."

"There," she said, turning with a sigh of relief to Graham, "such a bore and so well rid of him. I do hope you've forgiven me. And I do hope you'll excuse my clothes."

She was wearing, as far as he could judge, very little but the thinnest of camisoles beneath the brocaded dressing-gown that a large enamel button held precariously together at the waist.

"The telephone bell has simply not stopped ringing," she explained. "One can't very well let it ring, and if you take the receiver down they cut you off and you're taxiless. I've not had a chance to finish dressing. I haven't begun to mix the cocktails. What sort shall we have? Not that I've much variety. Perhaps it had better be a bronx.

"And now," she continued, as she began her preparation, "I want you to give me some advice about some investments. It's not that I want really to make money, but I'd like to be able to have a thrill when I open the morning paper."

"As dull as that," he asked, "and with a telephone never silent?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Life repeats itself," she said. "Shares would be a new game for me. Tell me, it should be quite simple, shouldn't it?"

"How much would you be prepared to lose?"

"Oh, I don't know. About two hundred, I suppose; not more. Is that bronx all right?"

"Excellent," he answered. "And unless you wanted to gamble too wildly you ought to be able to do quite a lot with two hundred. You won't be actually buying the shares, you see. You'll be paying the difference, if there's a loss that's to say, between what the shares were bought at and what they fetch. There's brokerage, of course, and the interest on the broker's money to be added on. Not that that comes to much. They send you an account once a fortnight on contango day, but neither side bothers to pay till it's over fifty, so your two hundred ought to last you quite a while."

"I see," she said, "and all I've got to do is to go to a broker and explain things to him. The only thing is"— and for a fraction of a second she hesitated—"the

only thing is that I don't know any broker personally. I wonder if you could——"

She paused interrogatively, leaving him to complete her meaning.

"If I could go to a broker for you?" he said. "I shall be delighted. It wouldn't be any trouble to me at all. Humphrey Stirling hangs out practically next door to our offices."

The conversation was interrupted by the sudden imperious summons of the telephone.

"Who is that? What? Yes. Gwen Lawrence speaking. Oh, it's Guy. Good evening, Guy. How are you? I won't say it's days since I've seen you, but it must be hours. Far, far too many hours. And can I lunch with you to-morrow? I'll be delighted. Where? Ritz Grill at half-past one. That'll be heavenly. Good-bye.

"You see," she said, turning to Graham, "always the telephone."

"And yet you find life dull."

She pouted her lips.

"One lunch at Ciro's is very like another. There are only a limited number of dishes in the world, and by the time one's tried them all——"

"But one's hosts?" he suggested.

She laughed.

"No, no; one's hosts are as alike as the dishes they provide are all alike. I've exhausted the kaleidoscope, I'm afraid. But at least these shares will be new. You'll ring me up, won't you, and tell me what you buy? And, at any rate, even if the thrill from them is less than I expect, this little transaction is going to give us a chance of seeing more of one another."

And her hand was stretched out frankly in simple friendship to him, but in her eyes wavered momentarily a glance neither to be analysed nor forgotten.

. . . . . .

Early next morning Graham called upon Humphrey Stirling.

"I've come," he announced, "to consult you about some shares."

Humphrey leant back in his chair and drew a long white-fingered hand over the sleek expanse of his pomaded hair.

"If only more people would find themselves in your position I should find myself a considerably richer man. Concerning what manner of shares may I advise you?"

"I'm prepared," Graham told him, "to lose two hundred."

Humphrey whistled.

"Folk have come into this room," he said, "with proposals for netting a cool million, but never before has anyone come to me to suggest a loss."

"It's for a friend."

"That explains it; I see light."

"Humphrey, you are an ass."

"Not such an ass as your friend would appear to be."

"It's like this."

But Humphrey had lifted a warning finger of reproof.

"Why go into it? The fact stands that you have a friend who wants to lose two hundred pounds on the Stock Exchange. Many people who have started more ambitiously have not got so far. Do you think he would like to lose it in industrials?"

"Now, please——"

Humphrey Stirling gave a sigh of resignation.

"Very well, then. As you will. In Elizabethan parlance, better acquaint me."

Graham proceeded to explain.

"My friend would like this two hundred pounds to last as long as possible. So you'd better put me on to something that will fluctuate a little, but not too much."

"I see, not too desperate a hazard. Advance by brigades rather than divisions. Hand me the

Financial News. Brazil? Let me see. No, Brazil's too steady: that would be like advancing by platoons. Mexico? That, on the other hand, would be to advance in army corps. Death or glory. Not Mexico, I think. Florida? Now, that looks happier. There's a pleasant little sun-soaked concern in Florida which should suit your friend admirably. Wobbles a bit, inclined to wobble up rather than wobble down. From what I've heard, it's likely to remain fairly steady for a couple of months; then it'll go one way or the other with a rush. Something to do with the Gulf Stream or other. At any rate, we'll be able to grapple with it before the crash comes, and you might turn a tidy little sum. Your friend might do much worse than Florida Asiatics. How about it?"

"It could scarcely be better," Graham Moreton conceded.

"Then, let me see now, we'll allow your friend a drop of four points a share, and we'll allow him, to be on the safe side with the brokerage and stuff, a hundred and eighty pounds. That's forty-five shares, and with shares at eighty-seven, your friend will be holding some three thousand nine hundred pounds worth of Asiatics. That should send the lad with a happier smile about his duties. There remains now only the question of a reference."

"Oh, a reference."

It was the thing that Graham had not thought of. He had forgotten to ask Mrs. Lawrence for the name either of her bank or her solicitor.

"Yes," Humphrey repeated, "a reference. You hesitate. Ah, how clear it grows; the idea was, I presume, that if anyone was to lose two hundred it should be me. The oldest of old stories. And I thought a genuine novelty to be on its way."

For a moment Graham did not reply. He was thinking rather hard. It would be easy, of course, to ring up Mrs. Lawrence and get the name of some referee or other. But now he had come to turn the

matter over he was not certain that his having forgotten to ask her for a reference might not be a good thing really.

He was not too certain that he wanted Humphrey, who knew a good many of his friends and had an indifferent reputation for discretion, to know that he was buying shares for Mrs. Lawrence.

He did not attempt to analyse his preference for secrecy. It would be, he felt, just better.

"Look here," he decided suddenly. "I'll take those shares in my own name. My friend——"

But again a wearily reproving finger had been lifted.

"Why go into it?" Humphrey admonished him. "So much time is wasted on explanations that are quite unnecessary. If you'll put your name to the business, that's enough for me. Forty-five Florida Asiatics at eighty-seven. And at four points down you sell."

Ten minutes later Graham was explaining the transaction to Mrs. Lawrence across the telephone.

"Florida Asiatics," he explained to her. "They are at eighty-seven now, and you don't touch the limits of your two hundred till they've got to eighty-three."

"But it isn't too likely to do that, is it?"

"Oh no, it's wobbling a bit; up, rather than down, he told me. After two months, though, it'll go one way or another with a rush, but we can sell out before that happens. It's a long time off—two months."

Yes, it was a long time, she repeated to herself. Every fortnight at the least for two months he would be coming to see her now. And if in that time she could not make him fall in love with her. . . .

"And you'll be coming round on contango days," she said, "to tell me all about it, and to advise me what to do. I can't tell you how grateful I am for all the trouble that you've taken."

With a gay smile she replaced the receiver on its

clamp. It would make an amusing interlude. She had needed some such excitement as the daily examination of the market would give her, and it had been clever of her, too, to think of entrusting the negotiation to this boy, who had needed a punishment so badly. There were few worse punishments for a man than the finding himself in love with a woman who despised him. She was killing two birds really with one stone. She would teach Graham Moreton a lesson, and into her own life she would bring variety. It would make the summer pass quite amusingly. Never had she felt more sure, more confident of herself. Never had she trusted more completely in her cold-blooded mastery of her emotions. It was so easy to make a man fall in love with you when you were not yourself in love with him, when you could stand outside watching the effect upon him of each word and tone and gesture. And he could not run away. He would have to continue seeing her.

It might mean a loss of two hundred pounds, but that was not a great matter, after all. There were a number of things that she could sell. She had several more rings than she really needed. She had never cared for rings. You did not need rings if you had hands like hers. There was that opal ring and the circlet of diamonds and rubies. She had quarrelled with both of the men who had given her those.

It would be easy enough to find two hundred pounds' worth of stuff she had no use for. But then, wasn't it rather foolish to sell anything when she had Guy Fortescue there?

At lunch that afternoon at the Ritz laughingly she put her proposition to him.

"You're a betting man, Guy, aren't you? Well, I'm going to put you up a thoroughly sporting offer. I've just bought some shares, a dead cert. Florida Asiatics, bound to go up. I've gone in up to two hundred. Well, I'll give you ten per cent of any winnings if you'll promise to take over my losings, not

that there'll be any, of course. Almost a gift, Guy, really! "

"Ten to one on their going up, in fact."

"To you, yes, twenty to one to anybody else. It's a dead cert."

And on her lips and in her eyes flashed that rare, impelling smile in the glow of whose radiance he could deny her nothing.

"All right, my dear," he said, "only not more than two hundred, mind."

A gleam of triumph glinted in her eyes. Ah, but how easy it was, this making of money out of love. Love was the most advertised commodity in the world and the most expensive. The money that was spent on it, the industries and the interests that were supported by it, directly and indirectly.

This room, for instance, with its elaborate upholstery, its delicate manipulations of light and shade, its softly blended colours, its liveried attendants, what was it after all but a setting where the preliminaries of love were staged—a place where men and women could speak softly to one another, where all violent sensation was subdued into a quiet harmony, where nothing could seem desirable but love?

The long row of shops down the length of Regent Street, window after window stocked with lingerie and jewellery, by what were they supported but the desire of woman to be desired; the ceaseless effort of man to decorate and refine an instinct that the beasts of the field share with us?

The books, the plays, films and music, what were they but excitants to love, or commentaries on love? Authors and novelists and musicians, merchants and jewellers, the proprietors of restaurants, one way or another they were all making profit out of love, all turning to gold this desire to decorate an instinct, this desire to be desired, and she along with them.

"We are all part," she told herself, "of the same profession."

PART II

CHAPTER XI

VARIETIES OF LOVE

BUSINESS, reflected Madge Gillett, was for the second week in June unquestionably poor. Half-past five; and since two o'clock with five girls chattering their heads off in the drawing-room annexe, only one man had climbed the three winding stairs of the stern-faced house in Clarges Street whose two upper stories contained her discreet and spacious maisonette. Not that business at the best of times was to be compared with what it had been once. What with there being less money about and with men's tastes changing, and the women of their own class proving so infinitely more accommodating, there was scarcely a living left for such women as herself. It was the war that had started it. But for the war it would never have occurred to the majority of men that love might be made more cheaply, more safely and as easily within the boundaries of their own acquaintance. She had been told that there were two thousand houses such as hers in London. If there were, all she could say was that there must be one thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine remarkably clever women in it.

Raucously the front door bell began to ring.

"At last!" she murmured, and hopefully hurried out into the passage.

It was only a girl, however. A rather timid and, as far as could be seen in the half-light of the hall, rather insignificant-looking girl; well-dressed, however,

in the way that maids are when they wear their mistress's discarded clothes.

Madge Gillett eyed her suspiciously.

"Well?" she asked.

"I'm from Dulcie Cartwright's," the girl explained.

For a moment the suspicion deepened in Madge's eye; then she nodded her head.

"All right," she said, "come in."

Nervously the girl followed her into the warm, scented, heavily-curtained drawing-room.

"Well," Madge asked abruptly, "what about it?"

"I'm not happy there. May I come here?"

Slowly, critically, Mrs. Gillett noted and appraised the immediate characteristics of the girl who stood shuffling opposite her. A frail, dark-haired, sallow little thing, and it was a blonde really that she needed: if she needed anyone; a thing she was prepared to doubt. There was scarcely enough work to go round as it was. But you had to have fresh faces. It was in search of variety after all that men came to this sort of place. A fact that the girls themselves would never realize. They were so vain, so self-assured. They did not know how hard she had to work for them: how often at first a man would shake his head, how she would have to offer him a drink and talk to him for ten or twenty minutes making him feel at home and then saying confidentially, as one friend to another, "You were rather silly, you know, not to see Gladys. She's very nice."

She'd have trouble, probably, with this girl in time. If Dulcie had quarrelled with her, she would. But then one expected that. And there was about her a faint suggestion of demureness, of reluctant yielding that some men would find attractive. At the same time . . .

The girl noticed her hesitation.

"If you'd take me," she said, "I could promise to bring a good number of men along with me."

That was a consideration: even if she had to pay this girl a commission of a third on everyone she brought, one man brought other men. It was not a thing she particularly cared to do, especially with Dulcie Cartwright. They had been good friends once. They had been young together, and poor together. And she was not sure that the happiest days of her life had not been those when they had dined night after night in the Strand at Oddie's, and Dulcie had planked down her shilling on the table. "That's all I've got, waiter. Twopence for you. What can I have for tenpence?" But Dulcie had gone one way and she'd gone hers, and business was bad and if she didn't take this girl on somebody else would, and commercial consciences were out of place in post-war London.

"All right," she said, "when will you begin?"

"Thursday week. It'll take me ten days to make arrangements."

"Very well then. I'll be expecting you on Thursday."

But it was regretfully, for all that she had made a genuinely profitable arrangement, that she walked back from the front door into the drawing-room. She could wish that she had not come from Dulcie's.

She had hardly sat down before the bell began to ring again. "When I get sent to prison," Madge murmured as she lifted herself out of her chair, "it'll be the first holiday I've had for a dozen years."

But it was with a bright welcome that she walked out into the hall to open the door upon the tall, well-groomed figure of Christopher Stirling.

In his hand he was carrying a silk hat. Against wide lapels were pressed the stiff white petals of a gardenia. Above a fawn-grey double-breasted waistcoat a silver grey Ascot tie was held in place by a small pearl pin. Smooth and creaseless the short skirted morning coat fell away over the pleated sponge bag trousers.

"Are you busy?" he asked, "or may I come and talk to you for a moment?"

Christopher's association with the house was entirely unprofessional. He had been brought there during the war by a number of fellow officers after a large and jovial lunch. They were to go to a theatre in the evening, and there were two hours to be spent before the long bar opened at the Troc. They had arrived there in a noisy and laughing bunch, had made their choices and left him eventually alone with Madge.

There had been the slightest trace only of embarrassment in the smile with which he had turned to her.

"This isn't, really, you know," he said, "my game. Do you mind if we just sit quietly and talk?"

And as they had sat talking there, he had found himself genuinely attracted by what, for want of any more explicit term, he had described to himself as her reality. For some reason, which at the time he had been unable to discover, this place of counterfeit passion and calculated hospitality had seemed genuine where so much else was false. And he had returned to find again there a sensation of release, that he had come finally to recognize as a kinship between the conditions that governed his life and this woman's. In Madge Gillett's attitude to life, there was the same conflict to reconcile the demands of livelihood and impulse, that harassed so constantly the artist in himself. The question that had been set to Madge had been set to him. For each of them the one chance of self-establishment, of lifting themselves out of obscurity, lay through an exploitation of their capacity to please. They were entertainers, faced with the same problem. The creative impulse which is an urge primarily to give, had to become in their hands a medium through which to take: a contest that had left impulse for Madge Gillett if not dead actually, coarsened certainly and enfeebled; and in his own life a rarer and rarer visitant.

He was greeted with a smile.

"There's no one here," she said. "A whisky?"

He shook his head. He had just come from a wedding, he told her, and the champagne had been as sugary as it had been plentiful.

"I can't think," he said, "why one goes to weddings. With divorce as fashionable as adultery, you can't nowadays believe that marriage is an irrevocable step; it has ceased long ago to be dramatic. Perhaps it's good to be seen about; and it's the way, I suppose, one gets commissions. But it's years since I've seen you, Madge, tell me about yourself."

She proceeded to. One by one the battalions of her mischances were marshalled and addressed. Things were not what they were. Tastes changed and people's views of things. Before the war if people were married they stayed married, and if a man got bored with marriage he came to her. Now if he got tired of his wife he found a new one. And with women as casual as they were, the bachelors didn't need to come any longer to her sort of place. Things were in a bad way.

There was a tap upon the door.

"Can I come in?" a cultured and listless voice requested. "We've run out of cigarettes," the girl explained.

She was a lovely creature, blue-eyed and golden-haired, with a pale clear skin, and a figure exquisite as a piece of Tuscan statuary. The artist in Christopher watched her admiringly, as she moved across the floor, and stretched out a languid, slim-fingered hand towards the silver cigarette box.

"Has she been here long?" he asked, as she left the room.

"Only a few weeks."

"She's about the loveliest thing I've ever seen."

Madge Gillett shrugged her shoulders.

"She isn't much good here," she answered. "Men never ask twice for her. She won't play up

to them. You've got to be a good actress at this job."

Chris nodded his head. How clearly the picture rose; how vividly he could see her, cool and white, faultless as marble and as cold, indifferent and contemptuous; refusing to cheat men into a favourable impression of themselves by placing herself upon a level with them, refusing to admit equality, to share their ardour. The artist who was incapable of hackwork, who couldn't paint to order. And it was what one had to do, three-quarters of the time, unless one was going to the wall; it was by hackwork that one bought the leisure to do the things one really wanted.

"The trouble is," Madge Gillett said, "she's too much in love with one man she can't get, to bother over the ones she can."

She believed in love too much to make money out of it. And as Christopher Stirling drove back through the goldening streets, he wondered whether the analogy held true of art; that it was not till one had ceased to believe in art that one started to be successful. He remembered the days when he and his contemporaries had spoken contemptuously of money. "We will do," they had said, "the things we want to do. If we attract the public well and good, if not, it can't be helped. Success is accidental." That was how he had spoken twenty years ago. And what had come of it? The only ones out of his crowd to speak in that tone now were those who had remained obscure: the others one and all had come in their different ways to compromise; to paint portraits instead of landscapes, to compose songs instead of opera, to write their stories the length that suited the editors of magazines. They had abandoned their old belief that the subject selected its own treatment: they saw their subjects in terms of the hour's commercial needs. And did that mean that they had ceased to believe in art, or was it that their former whole-hearted enthusiasm was ignorance, and

that the artist when he had learnt his craft could work to order, retaining his independence by the surrender of what was inessential?

You had to compromise to be free; to be above, so that you might be outside the battle; so that you could reach the platform of detachment from which you could watch without belonging; which it would be impossible to reach without surrender; you had to compromise unless. . . .

Unless what? Unless, he supposed, one could be content with simpler things. If one could do without the noise and the publicity and praise, if one could work as Cézanne worked, quietly a long life through; if . . . but that was to postulate a particular type of temperament: and he was not one of those deep placid natures that can take root where they are planted. You might as well talk of "Love in a cottage" to Gwen Lawrence. Even in the early days when there had been no hack-work for him to do, the days which in retrospect he was inclined to idealize, it was always the coloured prospect of success that had stayed him in the hours of doubt. One's life must fit one's nature. One did the thing one could, and complaint was idle, but as he turned his car into the garage, he thought a little ruefully of all the painters and poets and musicians symbolized for him in the blue-eyed, gold-headed girl who could create only in inspired moments, and who in their incapacity for other work, had only the white sheath of their talent to surrender with indifference or disgust to the conditions that livelihood imposed on them.

. . . . . .

"A young lady, sir," announced Robinson on Christopher's arrival, "who could not give me her name, but who professed acquaintance, and whom I have, I believe, seen here before, insisted upon waiting till you returned."

Christopher pursed up his lips. He was giving a dinner party that evening at the Berkeley, and he had

several letters that he would like to have written first.

"You seem less efficient, Robinson, than once, in protecting us from interlopers. However, what manner of young lady is it?"

"I think, sir, you will consider her to be an extremely attractive young person."

Surprise was one of the sensations that Christopher had claimed, not wholly with injustice, to have removed from his emotional repertoire. "If I could be surprised," he maintained, "I should be incomplete. For there would be things I had not experienced." And even if now and again his blood would move a little quicker, even if he was forced occasionally to murmur, "This is hardly what I had anticipated," he had acquired a composure that masked very adequately such inner tumults. And so for all that his heart as he walked into the room had given a leap of astonished curiosity, he was able to greet his unexpected guest as though it were the most natural thing in the world to see her there.

"Joan Faversham!" he exclaimed. "And how nice of you to come and see me! I was only wondering this morning whether you had forgotten me completely."

Her answering smile was not particularly convincing. She stood in the centre of the room, very straight and stiff; her fingers picking nervously at the pale pink tassel of her parasol. Her forehead was lined with worry.

"I've come," she said, "to ask you about Mrs. Lawrence."

She spoke in the quick, brusque tone of one who has something so hard to say that it must be said at once, if it is to be said at all.

Christopher Stirling raised his eyebrows.

"Why, of course," he said. "Mrs. Lawrence is an old friend of mine. Do you prefer Egyptian cigarettes or Virginian? I'm afraid I haven't any Turkish."

She shook her head. She didn't want to smoke, she said.

"You won't mind, though," he asked, "if I do. You won't? Thank you very much. It will be my last cigarette before dinner, and there is a sentiment attaching to last moments. Though, of course," he added, "in your company I would willingly be deprived of it." And the quick, disarming, attractive smile flickered for an instant in his eyes. "But you've come," he continued, "to ask me about Gwen Lawrence. Now what about her?"

Less ill at ease now, but still unhappy and perplexed, Joan Faversham leant forward.

"I've come to ask you," she said, "what sort of a woman Mrs. Lawrence is."

"What sort of a woman? Rather a nice sort of woman, I should say."

"That she's attractive, you mean. I could see that, of course. But is she——" For a second or so Joan hesitated. "Is she straight?"

"It depends," Christopher Stirling answered, "on your definition of the word straight."

"You know what I mean; please."

It was Christopher's turn now to hesitate. When finally he spoke it was to answer her obliquely.

"Wouldn't it be better, don't you think, if you were to tell me what's worrying you? It would be so much easier for me to help you then."

"I don't want to be helped: nothing's worrying me," she spoke stubbornly, rudely almost; as one who is prepared to defend her secret at any cost. "I've come to ask you a question, that's all."

"Which you would not be asking," he said quickly, "if something wasn't worrying you. What reason have you for thinking," he asked quietly, "that there's anything between Graham and Mrs. Lawrence?"

She gave a little start at that.

"I haven't said——" she began.

But Christopher cut her short.

"You wouldn't be asking me about Gwen Lawrence unless you were afraid that something was happening between her and Graham."

Steadily she looked him in the face. For a moment he thought that she was going to resist him. Her lips had begun to frame indeed the opening syllables of a denial; then suddenly, before the need, the overpowering need of sympathy, the strength went out of her.

"No," she said wretchedly. "And I'm terrified."

Her defences were down, and with them had gone that embarrassing sensation of constraint that had made her behave as though Christopher was an adversary, and not a friend. They were in sympathy and could speak freely now.

"You'd better tell me," he said, "hadn't you. Terrified? Why should you be?"

"Because he hasn't mentioned her to me for six weeks."

"And he used to, once."

She nodded her head.

"Not much; occasionally. She would come up into the conversation as one's friends and the people that one's seeing do. He would repeat things that she had said. Casually, as matters of general interest, but of no importance. Then suddenly he ceased to speak of her: and I began to wonder; not very much, but just a little. I supposed that that business he had been arranging with her was at an end. Two days ago I mentioned it.

"'You've finished, haven't you,' I said, 'that business of yours with Mrs. Lawrence?' He flushed a little. 'Not quite,' he answered, rather abruptly, and brought out his next sentence quickly."

"But I don't," said Christopher, "see anything particularly suspicious in that."

"Perhaps not, but taken with other things."

"What other things?"

She hesitated.

" It's hard to explain. But he's not quite the same as he used to be with me."

" No? "

He left her to explain, and as before, at the cocktail party, she had a curious sensation of speaking into a confessional. To Christopher, because he was distant and apart, she could speak as she could not have spoken to her closest friend. It would have seemed the rankest treachery to speak in this way of Graham to her brother or her mother. But it was different with Christopher.

" How is he different? " Christopher was asking her. " Is he unkind? "

" Oh no; not unkind," she answered hastily; " he's never that, and at times he seems to be more in love with me than he's ever been; wildly, hectically in love. At other times he does not seem to notice me at all; he seems to be thinking of something or someone completely other."

" But——"

" Oh, I know," she interrupted, " that it sounds fearfully ridiculous. But that isn't all. He's started gambling. Not very much, I imagine, on the Stock Exchange. And he never told me. I should never have found out if your brother hadn't spoken about his shares to him one day when I was there. I forget exactly what he said—nothing important, anyhow. Something about it being a good time to sell, I think. But it was a surprise to me. I knew Graham had only got a very little money saved, and I shouldn't have thought that he'd have gambled with it without telling me, and I couldn't see any particular reason why he should gamble. There's nothing he could have wanted money very desperately for. Unless——"

" Unless what? "

" Oh, I don't know, Christopher; you'll think me ridiculously foolish, I expect, and jealous. But it wasn't unnatural, was it, to put two and two together?

When one cares as I care, that's to say. It wasn't too unnatural to wonder whether he wasn't behaving differently to me because he was in love with another woman; whether he didn't want money so that he might make love to her; and since he had ceased suddenly to speak of Mrs. Lawrence, although he was still seeing her, well, is it surprising, that I'm here to ask you what sort of a woman this Mrs. Lawrence is?"

Christopher had listened intently to her as she spoke.

"It's not in the least surprising," he said, "but you haven't, I'm very certain, the slightest reason to be alarmed."

He spoke in a firm, confident, cheerful tone; the very tone in which to allay and to remove suspicion. It would have been so easy to have over-emphasized that note of confidence; so easy, and where there was so much room for doubt, so fatal.

"How can you be certain?" she pleaded.

"Because I happen to know Gwen Lawrence extremely well."

"But she's the sort of woman, *I'd* imagined——"

"The sort of woman," he caught her up, "who profits by her association with men? I don't deny it. She's got to live. But Graham isn't the sort of man she profits by. To begin with, he hasn't nearly enough money for her. She's not content with being taken to dinners and to dances. She expects presents, and expensive ones. She'd have no use for Graham unless she happened to be in love with him herself, which isn't likely."

"And why not?" the retort came quickly, hotly almost.

"For one thing, because she hates men as a whole very much too much. But chiefly because if she had fallen in love with Graham, and Graham had fallen in love with her, you wouldn't be wearing that ring upon your finger now. She'd have seen to that. Besides, Gwen Lawrence plays pretty straight."

"Straight!" She flung the word at him scornfully. "You call her life straight, taking all that and giving nothing in return! She'd be honester, far honester if she gave value for what she took."

Christopher shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know," he said; "it's a large question: an affair of demand and supply, I suppose. If men didn't think her worth it, they wouldn't spend all that on her. She's worth, like the rest of us, what she can get. There's a case for her. And, anyhow, being what she is, you may consider yourself pretty safe."

Joan Faversham was only half convinced.

"The other things, though," she insisted, "the shares."

"Is there any time when a man won't be prepared to gamble on what someone assured him is a dead safe thing?"

"And his difference to me."

"Ah, there," and again that quick smile lit the dark iris of his eyes. "Surely there is a rather obvious explanation for that. A long engagement's a strain, you know. Where one loves, at least. You must be patient with him."

A slow flush spread across her face, and a smile, the first real smile that day, dimpled the smooth surface of her cheek.

"That, oh that! Do you think that's all it is? Ah, but if it were——"

"What else, my dear, could it be?"

She stayed for only a few moments longer. A few minutes of happy, contented conversation: then, with a little smile, she rose to go.

"You've made me so happy," she said.

"Ah, no," he said. "It's not I that have made you happy. Graham has. As he always will, I think. You can't imagine, you know, how jolly it is to see two such nice people going to make each other happy."

She laughed outright at that.

"I wonder," she said.

"I know," was his reply.

And they laughed together.

"But I mustn't keep you," she said, "any longer from your bath. Thank you so much. You've been very kind to me."

For a moment in the doorway she hesitated.

"I can't help wondering," she said, "why anyone so charming as you has managed to remain for so long unmarried."

He smiled.

"We aren't all so fortunate as Graham."

She did not simper as would at such a remark so many girls, but the colour of her cheeks was slightly heightened.

"Surely though, some time, somebody——?"

"But the right person at the right time, oh, so rare, Joan Faversham! It's not too often that we fall in love for the first time with marriageable folk, or when we happen to be marriageable folk ourselves. And after the first time"—he paused and shrugged his shoulders —"the second time, you see, one suspects that there will be a fourth time, and is pretty sure there'll be a third. One's not so anxious to run risks. You're very lucky," he concluded. "Make the most of it."

CHAPTER XII

DINNER FOR FIVE

"HOW many people, by the way, has my brother ordered dinner for to-night?"

"Mr. Christopher Stirling, let me see," and the head waiter ran his pencil down the list of tables. "Mr. Christopher Stirling. No. 41. Eight-thirty. Five."

"Five. Thank you very much. And what sort of cocktail has he ordered?"

"Sidecars."

"Very good, then as we're a little early, we'll have a couple of extra ones over there."

And turning back into the lounge, Humphrey Stirling walked over to the table where Mildred Atkinson was sitting.

"There are only five of us," he said. "Ourselves, Christopher, Geoffrey Brackenridge, and Mrs. Marchant."

A dinner party, in fact, not unlike that of Lob's. An experimental party, with Christopher as the grand inquisitor. It was several weeks since he had seen Mildred Atkinson, a good three months since he had heard anything of Geoffrey Brackenridge, and he was anxious to discover how fate was handling their destinies. Informal relations if only because the period of their action is more compressed, are usually more dramatic than formal ones. And in Geoffrey's case particularly, he was anxious to see what effect had been made on him by the change in the relations between

himself and Sybyl Marchant that would scarcely have failed during that interval to have taken place. That there would be some change seemed to Christopher inevitable; inevitable if only because by expecting change, we create change, so that although those favours that are spoken of as " last " are not in any sense of the word " ultimate " at all, but are stages merely in a process of becoming that has for its aim the complete fusion of one being with another, we loan to them, by our repeated and sustained insistence on their importance, a significance that makes them in a world of appearances no more distant than any other illusion from reality. Some change or other Christopher was convinced there would be. And he was curious to see how far Geoffrey would have succeeded in his attempt to pigeon-hole love as he had pigeon-holed such other employments of his leisure hours as golf, racing, and first editions.

He could remember so well the evening they had discussed their futures after the armistice in the ridiculously overcrowded estaminet behind the Lille Theatre, and Geoffrey had explained his scheme for arranging the material setting of his life.

Even then in those light-hearted days there had seemed a snag in it, so that Christopher had been forced to ask him : " And is that all ? "

" All ? Isn't that enough ? " Geoffrey retaliated.

Christopher did not answer, not directly at least.

" Isn't there going to be an Eve," he said, " within that Eden ? "

Thoughtfully Geoffrey had rubbed his chin.

" Perhaps," he said. " I don't know. There would be room for one. But that sort of thing, you know, is only the flavouring of life. Most people make the mistake of taking it for the entire dish."

" It's what it usually results in," one of the party remarked.

" Not with me," he had answered shortly. " *J'en ai soupé.*"

But it was not so easy to fit human beings into pigeon-holes, and Sybyl Marchant from what little Christopher had seen of her did not appear the sort of person who is to become the symbol of any system. He was anxious to see how the wheel was turning.

. . . . . .

His interview with Joan Faversham brought him to the Berkeley seven minutes late, but Geoffrey Brackenridge had not yet arrived. "So she's unpunctual," he told himself, "that doesn't make for the smooth working of a scheme."

A defect for which on this occasion he was not particularly concerned. That was the great advantage of dining in restaurants. Food was not spoilt there as it was at one's own home by unpunctuality. And he was not sorry for an opportunity of exchanging a few words quietly with his brother. He was anxious to find out how much cause for alarm Joan Faversham really had.

"I'm so sorry, Miss Atkinson," he said. "It's bad enough when guests are late but when hosts are too——" And he spread his hands sideways in a histrionic gesture of contrition.

Mildred Atkinson smiled up at him prettily over the edge of her glass. In this new atmosphere into which she had been transplanted, where she still felt a little like the girl who does not know which forks to use, she had found that the best repartee was often silence and a smile.

"And I'm afraid," Christopher continued, "that I'm not yet done with my apologies. For I'm going to ask you to allow me for three minutes to talk business with my brother. I was thinking, Humphrey, of selling out some of those Transylvanian railroads."

Humphrey displayed neither enthusiasm nor concern.

"You might do worse."

"As I felt. Excellent. And with what am I to fill their place? That young lad, Moreton, was telling

me of some little concern or other that you had put him on to."

"Florida Asiatics."

"Yes, that was it. Florida Asiatics. Would you recommend it?"

Humphrey hesitated.

"It depends," he said at length. "Do you want to gamble?"

"Not more, probably, than Graham does."

"But then Graham's getting these shares for a friend."

Christopher lifted his eyebrows. Joan had had apparently more cause than he had suspected for alarm.

"For a friend? I thought it was his own gamble."

"He took the shares in his own name," Humphrey explained, "but they were taken for someone else. At least, so he told me."

"You don't know for whom?"

"I did not ask."

"You're an incurious creature."

"Incurious? Am I? I hardly think so, Chris. Economical, I should say. There's so much that I should like to know that I shall never know, that I'm not going to waste my time finding out things that don't really matter to me. Why go into them, I say. One's got to economize somewhere. So I economize in time. It's not of the least interest to me to hear who Graham Moreton buys his shares for. The great thing is that they should be bought, and there should be a signature to stand the racket. Then I can get busy with the next thing."

Christopher laughed.

"You're an odd creature, Humphrey, and you can buy me some Florida Asiatics if you like. I'd better be in the swim with all the rest."

"And who the rest may be," he added to himself, "is my job, I imagine, to discover."

Not that anything he might do would be likely to be of any use. People had to work out their own

troubles for themselves. They made them, after all. But it was as well to know. You could say the right word then at the right moment. You couldn't prevent people being hurt. But you could do something, perhaps, to ease the bruises.

"I'd better," he thought, "go round one day soon and have a little chat with Gwen."

. . . . . .

With pontifical solemnity the machinery for Crêpes Suzette was wheeled across the floor to Chris's table. On either side of it in tranced obedience hovered two junior waiters; in the centre above the aluminium dish with its bravely spluttering flame, the master and dispenser of its mysteries watched the thick yellow lump of curaçao sauce melt on the heated metal.

"Just like a Mass," murmured Humphrey, "the high priest officiating at the altar. The two servers on either side of him."

The floor of the dish was a bowl of steaming amber. With infinite care the head waiter spread over it the smooth soft pancake, that lay clear and quiescent for a moment, to heave and harden and change colour as the boiling liquid worked on it. As the priests of old time watched the victim writhe at the stake, calm and inscrutable, the head waiter looked down upon his quivering subject, judging the exact moment at which the oblation of brandy should be shed upon it, and the dish be turned to a fury of leaping flame.

With wide and ecstatic eyes, Mildred Atkinson observed the ceremony. How happy she was; a little breathlessly, perhaps, as though she were breathing too keen an air. But no less thrillingly for that. It was the first time that she had dined here, and how often in the past, as she had ridden past on the tops of buses, had she not looked down enviously into the crowded room, with its flowered tables, and flowerlike dresses. She had felt herself to be turning the pages of a book of travel, pausing before the pictures of a place lovely beyond imagining, distant beyond visitation. In the

same way that that picture would represent to her a country she would never tread, a climate she would never know, a beauty that must be for all time foreign to her, so had that brief glimpse of ornament and display represented for her a world remoter than Tahiti and Cotopaxi; a world from which she was excluded by the impalpable and therefore more ponderable barriers of upbringing and class. And yet into these regions that had appeared so inaccessible she had marched in a single stride. She wished that the arched windows were not curtained so that the women who looked down from the tops of buses might have been the witnesses of her triumph.

"Christopher," Humphrey was announcing, "have you seen Heresy trying to signal to you?"

More than once during the course of dinner her eyes across the room had met Lord Heresy's, and they had smiled in the manner of those that share a secret. She had only met him once at Christopher's cocktail party, but there had been no mistaking the gleam of interest which had lighted his face as he had talked to her.

And when he came across after dinner to their table, although it was to Humphrey and Christopher that he spoke, she knew that it was to herself that his conversation was addressed.

"Goin' on anywhere afterwards?" he asked.

"We thought," said Christopher, "of sampling 'The Cave of Melody.'"

"What's that? The latest night club?"

"Not quite; a sort of Bohemian cabaret."

Lord Heresy shrugged his shoulders.

"Not quite my line, I'm afraid. I've got a crowd goin' to the Embassy. Better join us, hadn't you?"

His eyes were on Mildred Atkinson. It was to her, she knew, that the invitation was being made. And her toes within her shoes curled inwards upon themselves.

"It's awfully nice of you," Christopher said, "but

there's a show on at the Cave that we particularly want to see."

Mildred pouted. She would much rather have gone to the Embassy with Lord Heresy, where there was a good floor and a decent band, and she would be in the same room with what she was seeing everywhere described as London's smartest women. But it was not for her, as the youngest of the party, to express her preference.

Lord Heresy also looked disappointed.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Still, another time, perhaps."

He was looking straight at Mildred as he spoke. There was no mistaking the implied significance of his words.

CHAPTER XIII

"THE CAVE OF MELODY"

LONDON, it has been often said, possesses no Latin quarter. That, for some reason or other, is not our game, and such clubs and restaurants as pride themselves on their Bohemianism are imitations, dingily insincere, of the sort of thing that flourishes so naturally in Montparnasse. "The Cave of Melody," however, like "The Golden Calf" before the war, did for the brief summers of its burgeoning enjoy an atmosphere peculiarly and refreshingly its own. It was like nothing else.

It consisted of two large rooms divided by a sort of hall on the first floor of a depressingly-appearanced house in Charlotte Street. At the extremity of the larger room there was a stage from which were beaten out the brazen syncopations of the latest foxtrots, and on the occasion of an all night revel, at suitable periods of the evening, the stray items of a variety programme were delivered. The all night revel would take place two or three times a month in celebration usually of some theatrical first night. They were described as fancy dress, and you went there in what you liked: in tweeds or dinner jackets, or in dominoes. You took your own drinks with you, which were consumed in the smaller room, with such solider nutriment as an unlicensed bar provided.

As is the case with all such places, the atmosphere of the Cave altered considerably if imperceptibly in the

course of its thirty odd months' existence. Bloomsbury founded it, Mayfair discovered it, Belgravia laid wreaths upon the coffin. At this particular period of its history it was perhaps at its gayest and most varied. It was less underworld than it had been, less upper world than it was to become. There were still as many lounge suits as there were dinner jackets. And of the hundred and eighty or so present, a score perhaps were in some sort of fancy dress.

It was half-past eleven, the best of all times to get there, when Christopher and his party arrived. For the first twenty minutes it was cold and empty and forbidding; and by twelve it had grown so crowded that it would take half an hour to discover who was and who was not there, and Christopher wanted to be early enough to find partners for his guests. That was one of the charms of "The Cave of Melody." You went there to see your friends, not to remain with the party that you had come with.

And you had always, as you walked down the bleak stone-flagged passage, the agreeable knowledge that part of the noise that was surging through the swing glass door was being contributed by the last of all people in the world that you would expect to find there. The surprise on this occasion was provided for Christopher by a long, slim, ill-kept figure with lank disordered hair, a pair of indescribably uncreased and presumably grey flannel trousers that flapped and bagged over a pair of violet and unsuspended socks, clad about the waist and shoulder in a black three-button coat trimmed about the neck and shirt and sleeve with astrachan, that identified itself as one of Humphrey's most pleasant and least reputable acquaintances.

"My dear John," Christopher exclaimed, "what are you wearing?"

"My own invention, Christopher, made to my own pattern. I've been to see 'The Enemies of Woman,' fifteen times—have you seen it? Wonderful film, wonderful! I felt I must look like an Ibanez hero. It is

nice to see you. Hope I'm not drunk, are you?" and he dived a grubby hand into a grubbier pocket from which he produced, surrounded with string and dust, a round tobacco tin. "Just one more pipe," he explained, "then we'll take a walk outside and I'll tell you all about a film I'm going to have taken privately."

He filled his pipe and lighted it at the sixth attempt.

"Now," he said, "now, I'm ready. It's to be called 'The Cities of the Plains! Eton and Oxford.' We'll make our fortunes. Your brother's going to float us as a company. Come along."

Christopher looked round him for his guests. He had already introduced them to a number of people. They were dancing, the four of them, with agreeable partners. The music had only just started. It would be a good ten minutes before they would need to be again looked after. And John MacFarlane was entertaining company.

"Let's take a turn outside," he said, and arm in arm they strolled together round the mournful foliage of Fitzroy Square, talking of this and that, of that and the other thing, so pleasantly that their walk lasted a good deal longer than ten minutes. By the time they returned it was to find Geoffrey Brackenridge leaning, a peeved and ungracious figure, against the doorway of the larger room.

"Oh, there you are," he said. "Tell me, who's that man Sybyl's dancing with?"

Christopher searched for her round the room and at last found her, her eyes lit and sparkling, her body swaying to the foxtrot's rhythm, her hand resting on the dinner jacket of a very good-looking and very well-dressed man whom he knew by sight but not personally, and not by name.

"I'm not certain," he replied. 'He's often here. I can find out quite easily if you like." And he turned in search of someone who might enlighten him. But a hand caught him by the arm and pulled him back.

"You don't know," Geoffrey said impatiently. "You don't know him! You didn't introduce him to her?"

"How could I if I didn't know him?"

"Then you mean," he said, "then . . . how on earth then is she dancing with him?"

He spoke quickly, fretfully, and there was a hot angry flush upon his cheeks. Christopher took him by the arm and led him into the smaller room.

"My dear fellow," Christopher said, "for heaven's sake don't get excited. One dance had ended. The man she was with wanted to dance with someone else. As he didn't see me anywhere, and as he didn't probably remember that you had come with her, naturally he thought that the only polite way of getting rid of her was to introduce her to someone else, which apparently he has done."

Geoffrey accepted the explanation grudgingly.

"She shouldn't have," he said. "She might have known that I should have been waiting to dance this with her."

"That's absurd! How was she to? Had you asked her?"

"No, but——"

"Then, my good Geoffrey, as you hadn't asked her to dance and as when the music stopped you were dancing with someone else, she very naturally supposed that for the next dance too you would be engaged. At any rate, you can hardly expect her to refuse someone else on the off-chance of your waiting. Besides," Christopher added, "she's a social creature. She enjoys, I expect, meeting new people."

At that moment Sybyl Marchant came into the smaller room with the unknown partner.

"That was a fine dance," he was saying. "I don't know when I've enjoyed a foxtrot more. Now what will you have? There's not much, I'm afraid, that this bar can offer you. There's tea, coffee, lemonade, and a villainous concoction called, I believe, cherry

cider; a most unfermented juice. What is it to be?"

"The cider," she laughed. "I'll risk it," and leant forward, her plump white arms stretched sideways along the bar.

"Well, Mrs. Marchant," said Christopher, "enjoying it?"

She turned and smiled at him; a flashing, rippling smile.

"Terribly," she said. "And you? Why aren't you dancing though? And Geoffrey, you must make him dance."

Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes were roguish.

"Then perhaps," suggested Geoffrey, "we might have the next together."

"I'm afraid," said Sybyl's partner, "that Mrs. Marchant has promised her next dance to me."

From the quiet, concise, purposeful tone in which he spoke, and from the quick thoughtful look that Sybyl flung at him, Christopher more than half suspected that not till that moment had there been a word said of the next dance between them.

There was a pause, then Sybyl turned to Geoffrey.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "You should have asked me sooner. It must be one later now."

In silence Christopher stood watching her sip at the cherry cider, watching also the smile of flattered vanity that played beneath the moustache of the tall, well-dressed young man beside her. Did he realize, Christopher wondered, that he was being used, as women will use a man, as a weapon simply, to ensure their conquest of another; that he was himself nothing to her; that he was merely the sword that had lain handiest; that he would serve her purpose in her woman's war, and having served it, be discarded; did he realize anything of that? or was that smile of complacent vanity his complete conception of the incident? Would through the years that same proud smile return whenever he thought of her, and would he,

whenever he thought of her, reflect regretfully that he had only met her once—a pity! such eyes, such promise.

They munched a sandwich, drank their cherry cider. The music started. He placed his hand upon her elbow, and as he placed it there Christopher felt Geoffrey shudder at his side. It was quite time, Christopher thought, for him to be found another partner.

. . . . . .

It has been said that there is only one sure way of enjoying a modern dance, and that is to take to it a girl with whom you are not in the least in love. With the modern non-programme system there is every likelihood of a quarrel before the night is through. It is impossible to carry an evening's entire programme in one's head; especially when half the dances are promised as the next, or missing two, or the one after the next but one. Particularly is this the case at a place like "The Cave of Melody" where no numbers are put up. Within a quarter of an hour, between Geoffrey and Sybyl Marchant such a calamity had arisen.

And in this way.

Christopher had found Geoffrey a partner and she had asked him, when the music was beginning for the next dance, if she might introduce him to her sister. "I'm dancing this one I'm afraid," she said, "but my sister doesn't seem to be, I think."

Geoffrey looked anxiously about the room. Sybyl was not in the larger room. "Would you excuse me," he had murmured, "I must just see——" He hurried through the hall into the small room that was noisy with conversation and the clattering of plates and cups; the air was thick with smoke as he peered dubiously into it. That dark figure in the corner? No, it was not she. She was not here. She had said one later. Had she meant one later in the evening? Just any odd one later. Or had she defined it specifically as *the*

one later, the one after the one he had asked for? This very dance, in fact. At any rate, she was not here. Whatever she had meant she was not here. She had not troubled to remember and if she could not trouble to remember, then he was not going to trouble himself to worry her. Besides, there was the girl waiting in the dance room.

And at the moment, exactly, that he had left the bar, Sybyl Marchant, standing a little tired in the cool air of Charlotte Street, realized that the music had begun.

"The next dance," she said. "I must get back for this."

"I also, and what a pity. We must have another later in the evening."

"We must," she agreed heartily. But she scarcely listened to him. She was eager to be with Geoffrey again. He had learnt his lesson, she imagined. Her partner followed, emboldened by the willingness of her reply. Their colloquy in the open had been less fruitful than he had hoped from the readiness with which she had accepted his suggestion that it really was a little hot in the sitting-room. Seeing life as he saw it, he could hardly perhaps have been expected to understand that her ready acceptance had been inspired chiefly by the desire to appear cool and fresh and fragrant for her dance with Geoffrey. They arrived in the dancing room at the exact moment that Geoffrey was completing his first turn of the room with his new partner.

"Oh," she exclaimed.

Her ex-partner bent an attentive ear towards her.

"Yes?" he said.

"Nothing," she replied; and walked straight and quickly to a neutral seat on one of the red cloth-covered benches that flanked the room on either side.

It was at the same instant, practically, that Christopher and Geoffrey realized she was sitting there

alone, and they cast, each of them, about the room an equally despairing glance. If there is one thing more than another a woman hates, it is having to sit in a ballroom by herself. Men do not care for it. But they can pretend always to have been enjoying a smoke or drink or may assume a distaste for feminine society. A woman has no such resorts. Something had to be done.

Suddenly and providentially there appeared in the doorway the solitary and unsteady figure of John MacFarlane.

"John," Christopher shouted as he passed him, "can you dance?"

Upon the tall and elegant personality of Chris Stirling, John levelled a glazed and scornful look.

"Dance?" he said, "do I look as though I could!"

"Can you talk then?"

He drew himself up at that.

"Talk?" he said. "Am I not unsober?"

"Then for God's sake be unsober," Christopher implored, "beside that woman in the black dress on the bench across there. She's nice. Honest, she is. Say I sent you. They call her Mrs. Marchant."

And when he next passed Sybyl it was to hear John arraigning at the highest pitch of his powerful voice every film actor in the world but Lionel Barrymore.

. . . . . .

When a couple have begun to quarrel, it is profitless on that night at any rate, to attempt a reconciliation. The best plan is to focus your attention upon the one with whom you are most intimate, endeavour to pacify him and let the other one alone. That is what Christopher tried to do.

As they were grouped in a half-circle about the stage applauding a scandalous and modern rendering of an eighteenth century love song, he felt a hand close upon his elbow, and an angry voice muttered

in his ear: "Where's Sybyl? I can't see her. Where is she? I must find her." But Christopher made no attempt to find her. A hundred and eighty people grouped on chairs and forms and on the floor were congested in the semi-darkness.

"Come along," he said. "Let's go into the other room and chat." Brackenridge let himself be led. It was empty there, save for one ancient and ragged creature who leant forward half asleep across the corner table. He did not stir as they walked past him. Drunk, probably, they thought.

"It's your own fault, you know," Christopher said. "You cut her dance."

"I dare say, I dare say," he explained. "But how was I to know it was her dance? How can one tell now that you have no programmes? It was ridiculous ever to give them up. I can't think why we did. Part of the informality, I suppose, of modern life, or boasted informality." He laughed scornfully.

The bundle of rags in the corner shifted dreamily.

"Is it your wife?" it said.

"No," replied Geoffrey angrily.

"Then if it isn't," the muffled voice made answer, "you've no cause to worry. It's only wives that you need trouble about. I've had two and they both left me within five years. But I've had the same mistress for thirty years, and none of my friends has laid a finger on her. Too personal a piece of property, I suppose. Haven't touched her, not one of them, in thirty years. I wish one of them would sometimes."

And the obscene mess chuckled croakingly.

"Oh lord!" said Brackenridge, "let's get out of this."

The cabaret show had finished. The couples were straying back chatting, for the long interval, towards the bar and tables. In the narrow hall they passed Sybyl and her former partner laughing together. For a moment Christopher thought Brackenridge might go for them. "Come on," he said. "Let's

get outside." And he pushed him hurriedly through the door.

Outside, away from the noise and heat and music Geoffrey Brackenridge grew calmer. For the first time in his life as they walked southwards towards Oxford Street he slipped his arm through Christopher's.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I've been an ass. But I can't help feeling jealous. Myself, I met her at a dance, you see."

He said no more. There was no more, indeed, for him to say. He had said all in that one admission.

On such an evening and at such a dance a few months earlier he had met her. She had gone there as she had come here to-night with other friends, with friends to whom she had stood, perhaps, in the same relation that now she stood to him. He had met her casually, as she had met to-night this other man. She had met him, and for his sake those other friends had been relegated temporarily into the background of her life, as now for the other man he might so find himself discarded. What once had happened, might happen well enough again. She was a woman to whom things like that would happen. She had that striking quality that made men always when they passed her in the street look twice at her. As once she had attracted him, as she had attracted now this other man. And how was he to know what other man he had not himself on that first night supplanted? What she had done once, she might do again. For the first time, almost, he was realizing the vast implication of her acceptance of him. As she had accepted him, so for all he knew, might she accept or might she have accepted others. He could never feel for one instant sure of her.

Well enough now, could Christopher appreciate what effect that restatement of their relations had had on them. It had made Brackenridge intolerably jealous; or rather it had intensified his jealousy, for from the beginning he had been jealous. Three

months back, at the cocktail party, Christopher had noticed that. But he had no doubt found comfort then in the belief that though most women were capricious while they were being wooed, all women are subservient when they have been won. He had expected from their changed relations a complete reversal of their positions. And that reversal had not come.

She was the same friendly, witty, affectionate companion that she had always been. He was no more necessary to her than he had been before. He saw no more of her than he had done before. She had abandoned none of her habits and none of her friends. She had retained control completely of her emotional keyboard, the keyboard on which he had expected to play what tune he chose. Things were approximately unchanged. He had done no more than add to the repertory of their endearments.

And because Geoffrey had regarded as ultimate those favours that had been granted him, he found himself now unweaponed and defenceless. He had no means left with which to hold her to him. She was free. And he could no longer calm his anxiety with the hope that "soon, in a few days, a few hours, a few weeks, it would be different." There was nothing now he could hope for. What, where that had failed him, could succeed? She was free. He had no hold over her. That gift of herself that she had made so lightly, could be retrieved as lightly. She would remain with him so long and just so long as it might please her. She would go as easily as she had come. And that thought, because he was in love with her, he dared not face.

And as they walked slowly arm in arm through the soft summer night, Christopher smiled quietly to himself. "*J'en ai soupé.*" How vain a boast, and how he would have to pay for making it.

CHAPTER XIV

TWELVE HOURS OF TURMOIL

DROWSILY Mildred Atkinson blinked as a stream of unwelcome sunlight drifted across her eyes. She had not meant to wake so soon, and once awake she knew that she would not be able to go to sleep again. Besides it was after eight, and from the dining-room and kitchen came the laboured sounds of Mrs. Jocelyn's matutinal preparations. Breakfast would be ready in half an hour. Cautiously, so as not to disturb Humphrey, she extricated herself from the rumpled mass of sheets and tip-toed into the bathroom.

He was still asleep when she returned warm and fresh and scented from her bath. The hair upon his forehead was disordered, his cheeks were a little flushed and about his chin was the slightly grubby look that precedes a shave; but as he lay there with an elbow bent beneath his head he made a not unpretty picture; and a smile came into her eyes as she looked at him. It was a lovely morning. They would not waste the day apart. They would drive down into the country, and leave their car at some inn or other and wander together through the fields, letting the sun-drenched hours pass. It was a day for love making. "And it's time," she thought, "he woke."

So that the sunlight might fall across his face she drew back the half-drawn curtains. Humphrey blinked, lifted himself upon his elbow, rubbed his eyes and smiled.

"Heavens," he said, "I'm sleepy. That comes of these late nights. What's the time, pretty one?"

"'Bout half-past eight."

"And I've got appointments from ten o'clock. I must rush."

She walked over to the bed and seating herself upon the edge of it took his hand in hers.

"It's such a glorious day," she said. "I'd like to spend it in the country."

"And why shouldn't you?"

"But not alone."

He smiled, a kindly, indulgent smile that denied regretfully.

"If only," he said, "you knew how much work I have on hand."

She pouted, but did not protest. Instead she bent forward beside him on the bed, curled round his neck a cool, soft, scented arm, and set her mouth on his. But he responded to her kiss in the absent-minded way men have when they are not in the mood for love-making. "It's no good," she thought; but she was resentful less at the disappointment of her plan that at the failure of her kiss to move him; three months ago, she had only to lift her eyes to have her will of him.

"What are we doing to-night?" she asked.

"I'm afraid," he said, "that I've got to go to a dinner party that will be probably extremely dull but that should be extremely profitable."

"Then you won't," she asked, "be coming back?"

He shook his head.

"I don't know what time it'll end. They want me to go on somewhere. I'd better go back to my own place."

"And to-morrow?"

"To-morrow evening you shall make your choice of such poor amusements as this law-riddled city has to offer."

She laughed gratefully as he drew her into his arms,

but at the back of her mind lingered uncomfortably the memory of her failure.

. . . . . .

Humphrey's first appointment was not till half-past ten. But he had been scarcely five minutes in his office before Graham Moreton had tapped upon his door. It was contango day, and Florida Asiatics stood at eighty-eight and a quarter. That was to say, there was a profit on his shares of roughly fifty pounds.

"Don't you think," he said, "that the time has come to sell?"

Humphrey Stirling leant back in his chair, lifted an immaculately-trousered leg and crossed it above the other.

"That depends," he said, "on the spirit in which you are conducting this transaction."

"Now, Humphrey——"

"But seriously. If you want to make a profit of fifty pounds sell them, that's obvious. If you want to run the risk of making five hundred at the cost of losing two, hang on. It depends, as I told you, entirely upon the spirit in which you're going into it. If you're out for money or out for fun. It doesn't, I may add, matter to me in the least which you are. Only the sooner I know the better."

"Are they going to go up?"

Wearily Humphrey Stirling drew his hand along his head.

"If I knew," he said, "when shares were going up and when shares were going down, I should not be sitting at this desk now. I should be a millionaire."

"Surely you've some idea?"

"None," answered Humphrey cheerfully.

"Then it seems to me——" Graham began testily.

"It seems to you," Humphrey completed the sentence for him, "that I'm a pretty useless sort of broker. An assumption, my dear Graham, that does not confer a great deal of credit on your intelligence.

One can have no more idea of whether a share's going up or not than we can know whether Hobbs is going to make over fifty when he goes in to bat. His average, you may say, is sixty. The probability is therefore that he is going to make it. But you can really have no sure idea; any more than you can have that Tate will bowl Strudwick in the course of the next six overs. The law of average, which is the law of probability, tells you that Hobbs will make fifty and Tate bowl Strudwick within thirty balls; but Hobbs may make a duck and Strudwick bat an hour. You cannot tell."

"Still, if you admit that there is a law of probability?"

"I do. And the law of probability in this case says that they're as likely to go up as to go down, and that in a few weeks' time they'll go one way or another with a rush. In the meantime they're as good a thing to gamble on as any. But they're not to be recommended for the spinster's savings. That's how it stands and what about it?"

Graham hesitated. He knew all that there was to be known about the things.

"I must ask my friend's advice," he said. "I'll let you know."

"Any time you like. It doesn't matter to me."

Moodily Graham walked back towards his office. If only he could have brought back with him a clear recommendation to Gwen to sell. If only he could say: "These shares are as high now as they'll ever be. By holding on to them you'll be only piling up the interest on the capital you've borrowed." If only he could say that, and be rid for ever of this exasperating circumstance.

For that, he knew, was the one thing he wanted now. To be rid of it, to be free once and for all time of this transaction that held him to Ciber Crescent. If there were no longer any occasion for his visits, he would have the strength of will to discontinue them. But as long as the excuse to discuss business with Gwen

remained he would be, he knew well, unable to break the spell of attraction that she had laid on him.

Evening after evening, and with increasing frequency during the last weeks, he had found himself at the end of the day driving his car westwards by way of Marylebone. "I've just come in," he would say, "to tell you that your shares have gone up a quarter of a point." And she would smile slowly. "How nice of you to come and tell me," she would say. "I had noticed it myself, of course, but that doesn't make it any less kind of you."

And they would sit and talk together, and word by word, sentence by sentence, the strong tides of her personality would subdue and weaken him. Every time that he left her flat he would promise himself that never again would he return there. He would arrange things over the telephone in future. It was too dangerous. One should run away from temptation when one was not strong enough to face it. It would be madness for him to let himself fall in love with Gwen. Nothing could come of it except unhappiness; for himself and Joan and everyone who cared for them. He would arrange things over the telephone in future.

It hadn't worked. That rich, sweet voice along the wire was a magnet drawing him towards her. However hard he might try to say all that he had to say into the metal mouthpiece, sooner or later he would find his lips framing the invariable request, might he not come round and explain things to her? It hadn't worked.

And it must stop. Of that he was very certain. Somehow or other he must free himself of the occasion and the obligation of seeing her. It was with the fixed determination of persuading her to sell that he drove round that evening to Ciber Crescent.

She was untying, when he arrived, a large cardboard box. Every door in the flat, as far as he could gather, had been flung wide open, and the gramophone was playing the concluding strains of "Katerina."

"Graham!" she exclaimed. "How nice to see you. You can help me unpack this dress. Oh, that gramophone! Do be an angel and take the record off before the sound-box is completely ruined. I hope you'll like this dress. It looked heavenly in the shop, but you can't be certain. Ah!"

From its wrappings of tissue paper she lifted cautiously a flame-coloured film of stuff, held it at arm's length away from her, surveying critically, but appreciatively, the flicker on its shifting folds of the declining sunlight.

"Not too bad," she murmured, "not too bad. One moment, Graham," and turning she ran quickly out of the room to examine the dress more closely in the long oval pier glass of her bedroom. In a couple of minutes she was back again. "That's that," she said. "And tell me, am I a millionairess yet?"

She spoke light-heartedly. She had long since, he could see, ceased to take more than a casual interest in her shares.

"You're about fifty pounds to the good at present."

"Fifty pounds? That might be worse."

"Much worse. If I were you I'd sell out now."

"Why? Is the rush downhill going to begin?"

He hesitated. It would be so easy to lie to her. And he wanted so desperately to make her sell. He had almost begun to say "Yes," indeed, when something stayed him. He couldn't. There were some things one couldn't do, and to lie to her was one of them.

"Not exactly," he replied. "I don't even say that the rush I warned you about is going to start. I don't even say that they've got as high now as they're ever likely to. But they're reaching the risky point. In a week or so they'll be going one way or another in a hurry."

"But even if they do go down we shall have time, shan't we, to sell out before things have got too dangerous?"

"Oh yes, but——"

"But what?" She was perched upon the table; smiling downwards at him through the smoke that drifted upwards across her face from the extremity of the amber cigarette holder. "You're not going to tell me, surely, that I must play for safety and start saving up for my old age. Fifty pounds. What's fifty pounds, after all? Last time the shares stood at eighty-eight you told me to hang on."

He recalled, how well he recalled, that incident. It had been in early days. When he had persuaded himself, because he was anxious to retain the excuse for seeing her, that it would be better for her to hold on.

"It was different then," he said. "We weren't so close to the sudden change of value."

"But that change may bring me in a terrific lot of money."

"It might," he admitted grudgingly. "But you don't want to lose two hundred pounds."

"I don't mind," she answered cheerfully.

"Don't mind?" he echoed.

"Not fearfully. One's got to amuse oneself. And one's got to pay for one's amusement. Even if I lose my two hundred, which isn't likely, I shall have had a good two hundred pounds' worth of enjoyment out of it. No, no, Graham, don't you start worrying me to sell till the shares are up to a hundred or down to eighty-five."

She smiled gaily at him.

"Don't look so serious," she said. "There are several necklaces between me and the workhouse yet."

It was useless to argue. He could see that clearly enough. It was useless to argue. She would not sell, and the wretched business must continue, with these disquieting interviews growing more and more frequent as the weeks went by.

"Now that that's settled," she was saying, "you must tell me what you've been doing since last we met."

The old thing over again. The long conversations

about himself. The conversations that probed and laid bare his secret doubts and dissatisfactions.

"We're always talking about myself," he complained, "and I know so little about you."

"About me? But, then, I'm so far less interesting."

"My dear Gwen," he protested, "how ridiculous! All the time your telephone bell's ringing. All day long you're going out to new places with new people. You go to the newest plays, the newest restaurants, the newest night clubs. If your life isn't interesting, whose is?"

She shook her head.

"Oh no," she said; "restaurants and plays and night clubs don't make for interest. They may be the setting for interest. But they're not interest in themselves. They're external happenings. It's the things that are happening inside you that are of interest. Nothing," she added after a pause, "is happening to me now. And that, after all, Graham, is why you are of so much more interest."

She leant forward as she spoke; her hands rested on the table's edge, the long amber holder held away from her. Her face was more serious than he had ever before seen it. There was no mockery, no laughter, in her eyes' golden depths.

"The things that really mattered to me," she said, "happened a very long while ago."

"But when they were happening?"

"Ah, then!"

There was a pause. For a moment she seemed scarcely conscious of the room about her, of his presence, and, indeed, of hers too, in it. For a moment the long-lashed eyelids were lowered over the richly tinted depths; for a moment the damson-coloured lips were slightly parted.

"I wonder," he said, "whether my life now is half as interesting as yours was then."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Who's to say? Yours is happier, I think."

"You weren't happy then?"

Slowly Gwen shook her head.

"Happy," she said. "No, not happy. I can't remember that I was ever happy. To be happy is to be contented: to be at rest. And I was never that. No, I wasn't happy. The flame burnt brightly though."

Again there was a silence, and again, as so often formerly in Gwen's company, there rose stiflingly that vague nostalgia, that home-sickness for lost adventure.

"But you don't regret it?" he asked. "You wouldn't have had it otherwise?"

She shook her head.

"No, no, not otherwise," she said. "There are certain things one wouldn't have repeated, certain emotions that one does not want to feel again, certain excitements that one would not have the faith, the strength, the courage, what you will, to sustain twice. One would think one's life empty, though, half-lived, if one hadn't had them."

. . . . . .

For a long while that evening after Graham had left her, she sat motionless, staring with unseeing eyes towards the tattered sunset. It was getting late, she told herself. In a short while now Guy would be calling for her. They were dining at the Mitre, she believed, and there had been some talk of going on afterwards to that new night club in Silver Square.

They were going to it simply because it was new, so that they would be able to say to their friends, "But surely you've been to the Sixty-nine, my dear? Everyone goes there now." But it wouldn't be new at all really. It would be like all the other night clubs. A small floor, a deafening noise, exorbitant because illegitimate champagne. And the dinner at the Mitre would be like all the other dinners she had eaten there.

It had been true enough, what she had said to Graham of how long ago her life had ceased to hold any real interest. It was as monotonous as billiards

became when you had manœuvred the red into the centre of the table: when nothing but carelessness could break down your sequence of hazards.

"Shall I turn on your bath?" May Julian was asking.

Oh yes, let her turn it on. And what would she wear? That new flame-coloured georgette and an orange satin slip? Yes, that would do. And the gold shoes? What other shoes, good heaven help her! Through the half-open door came the sound of splashing water. Wearily she lifted herself out of her chair, resting the back of her hand against her forehead.

Heavens, but how tired she was of it all! This endless parade of men, their parties and their dances, and with one object at the back of it. Perhaps, after all, Graham Moreton was a little different. Perhaps she had been right that first time. All these weeks and not a word of love to her. Although he was with three-quarters of himself in love with her already, and most men were ready with their protestations before they had gone half as far. Not one word of love. Not a single action or gesture of it.

And he cared, she knew he cared. One could always tell if a man cared. Weeks usually before he knew himself. And all the time Graham had not said a word. Perhaps he knew it, though. Perhaps that was why he had wanted her to sell the shares. Because he was frightened of her. Because he did not want irrevocably to commit himself. Because—because what? Because he was different from the rest.

It might be that. And again it might not be that. Anyhow the weeks would show.

The water was splashing into the bath, and in forty minutes Guy would be calling for her and she would have to be fresh and bright-eyed and entertaining. Because? Oh, because one had to live, and in every profession one must keep on good terms with one's employer.

. . . . . .

It was in a not dissimilar mood that Graham drove back his car that evening through the sounding sunlit streets: a mood of dissatisfaction and regret. What was it she had said of the things one would not wish repeated, but that one would not wish to have been without? The emotions without which one would hold life to have been half lived?

Had he known any such moments in his life? And if he had not known them yet: if he were not knowing them now: was it likely that he would ever know them?

What of adventure indeed did life hold in store for him? In a few months' time now he would be married. The gates of potentiality would be closed on him. If he did not win through Joan to that fullness of sensation that Gwen had spoken of, what chance did he ever stand of realizing it?

And was he reaching it through Joan: through this relationship so ordered, so composed, so conventional in its expression and direction? What was there exceptional in their courtship, in their acceptance of each other, in their decision to live the residue of their years together? Were they to be found here, those emotions that one would not repeat, but without which one would consider life half lived?

Torturingly, as he guided his car past the complexities of the Marble Arch into the still passages of the park, torturingly these thoughts beat themselves upon his brain. It was unworthy, he told himself, unworthy and disloyal. One had no right to think like that, one had no right to feel like that. One must accept the obligations one invited.

It was a quarter-past seven by the clock at the corner of Park Lane. If he were to be changed in time for dinner he would have to be back within another twenty minutes. One tour of the park and then back through Queen's Gate to Onslow Gardens. Just time for it and no more.

He could not, though, on such a night, in such a mood. To sit at a long polished table between his

parents, to listen to their discussion of the evening paper, their analysis of some parliamentarian or other's motives.

Another night, perhaps, but not on this. Viciously he stamped on the accelerator. Viciously beneath his touch the car leapt forward to bound westwards along the flat of the Bayswater Road.

At forty miles an hour he swung out into the open road, curved southwards down Campden Hill: at thirty miles an hour the car turned to the right, through Hammersmith; another five minutes and he would be on the Great West road; the long gleaming stretch of metal towards Newbury and Bath: along which, as the car raced southwards, one would feel the back wheels lifting as an aeroplane's as it rises from the ground.

Between forty and fifty miles an hour he would thunder down that gleaming roadway, to let himself be drugged by speed as other men would let themselves be drugged by alcohol, to send his discontent asleep with the effort of keeping the car straight in the roadway's centre.

. . . . . .

Had Graham Moreton been in a less self-centred state of mind, and had he been driving his car at ten instead of twenty miles an hour he would have observed as he turned his car westwards into the Bayswater Road, the neat figure of Mildred Atkinson walkng in the opposite direction.

It had not been a particularly cheerful day for her. In the first place she had been piqued by Humphrey's refusal to spend the day with her, in the second she had been unable to find, after he had gone away, anything at all to do. She could think of no one whom she could ring up. She had never had many friends of her own sex, and such as she had had she had lost in her change of setting. During the morning, after wasting an unprofitable hour in an attempt at needlework, she had walked for a few moments in the park,

but the sight of the lovers slowly pacing the paths together had made her feel lonely and had driven her to return; so lonely in fact, that after lunch she had made the laborious pilgrimage to her mother's house in Highbury, from which she was now returning.

Slowly she walked down Oxford Street, gazing without much animation into the shop windows as she passed. There was no need to hurry. There was a whole evening to be killed. In front of Selfridge's she loitered a little. There was an oval mirror in the bedroom suite that was on exhibition, but her reflection in it failed to please her. A reluctance to incur the consequences of the parental curiosity that a display of her newest clothes would certainly invite, had led her to put on a dark blue coat and skirt which she had bought ready made two seasons back. She wrinkled her nose disdainfully.

"Did I really look like that?" she thought, and moved out of range of the reflection. She lingered though for a few moments before the window.

What a pity that one couldn't have the furnishing of one's flat over again. One had to decide things in such a rush, and so many things. Then one got ideas afterwards. Walnut was much jollier than mahogany; shone less, and she liked the curving spirals of the bed-posts. If only she had seen that suite first!

Regretfully she turned away. As she did so a hand clutched heavily at her elbow and an excited uncouth voice was calling her by name.

She turned, irritated and surprised. Then:

"My, but it's Henry!" she exclaimed. "What ages since we met."

And indeed it seemed to her that the Mildred for whom this shabby figure had waited evening after evening outside the Balkan Tea Rooms, was a creature of another century.

"What luck!" he was saying. "I was afraid

I'd never be seeing you again. It must be quite five months. You haven't been ill, have you?" he added anxiously.

She shook her head.

"Oh, no, I've taken another job," and she thanked heaven that she was wearing her shabby clothes.

"You might've told me."

"I wanted to, but it happened suddenly."

"You might've come back one evening."

"From the other end of London!"

"I waited," was his reproachful comment, "every evening for five weeks."

"My dear."

"Every evening for five weeks," he repeated, "and then one day I went down there. I was frightened I can tell you, with all those nobs sitting about there. I was so frightened that I didn't dare to ask for you."

She laughed at that, but her eyes were tender. There was always something curiously appealing about Harry's grubby ardour.

"Look here," he was saying. "I'm not going to lose you now I've found you. We're going to make an evening of it."

She hesitated; then nodded her head. They were unlikely to be going to a place where Humphrey or any of his friends could see them.

"We might go to some pictures," she suggested.

He extracted from his waistcoat pocket a heavy half-hunter watch.

"Twenty to six," he said. "Not too early, is it, for a bite?"

To be dining before six: at the hour of the first cocktail, before one went home to change. She could picture the gesture of horror with which Humphrey would contemplate such a solecism. Still, it was rather jolly to return to one's old world and one's old habits.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked.

He paused: then with the air of one who is doing something intensely dashing:

"Look here," he said, "it's ages since we met. Let's do it well. Let's go to a Corner House."

And so within three hours of the completion of a heavy lunch, she found herself confronted in a noisy and overheated room with an immense mixed grill, set about with triangles of cabbage; "Stuff to give 'em," said Henry, and spreading his elbows sideways, embarked on his assault. He ate noisily, with his mouth half open, and before he was half-way through the dish a dew of sweat had broken out upon his forehead. "Gawd," he said, "I'd like to take my waistcoat off," and drew the back of his hand across his face.

She watched him with a mingling of attraction and repulsion. She had forgotten how thick the joints of his fingers were and how square the nails. And yet for all that she could not help contrasting his roughness with Humphrey's elegance; she felt curiously at ease with him. She was no longer disturbed by that exciting breathlessness that made her among her new friends always a little conscious that she was still uncertain of her social forks. It was restful, to be back where one belonged. He made the sort of jokes she understood. And afterwards when they walked out into the cooling air, she did not draw away when he put his arm through hers.

"Suppose you've been out with a lot of fellows since we were together last?"

"No more fellows than you with girls."

"Then you can't have had much kissing. Time you began again." And he pinched the soft flesh of her arm expectantly.

Without any pretences, the moment they had been shown into their seats he pulled her face round to his. And the very roughness of his approach was a relief after the suave wooings to which she was accustomed. It was good after those slow gradations of skilled

caresses to have one's hair ruffled and one's lips bruised against one's teeth. In a thrilled surrender she rested her cheek against his shoulder.

His voice was blurred as they stood saying good-bye at the corner of Piccadilly.

"I must see you again," he said. "I must, I must. I can't lose sight again of you."

It was on the tip of her tongue to invite him to her flat. But it would be better for the present, at any rate, for him to be ignorant of her address. It would be wiser really to let him go out of her life altogether. Nothing could come of this. It would only mean complications for them both. But as always when she was with him, she found the blood beating quicker through her veins. And it was good to hear the huskiness of his voice witness to the extent of her power over him.

"Please, please," he said, and the hand that held hers was crushing upon her fingers. "On Sunday, let's go into the country somewhere. Let's take a bus to Epping."

She nodded her head slowly. She could always if she wanted get out of it.

"Very well," she said. "Eleven o'clock here."

. . . . . .

"You're wanted on the telephone, Miss Joan."

Joan Faversham lifted her eyes from the novel whose pages she had been turning drowsily since dinner. Her parents were dining out, and she had sat alone in the drawing-room window-seat while the room about her darkened. In a few moments it would have become too dark to read, but she was not certain that she would bother to turn the switch of the electric lamp. She would be content enough in the half-light with her thoughts.

Since her conversation with Christopher Stirling she had been, if not happy, at least not unhappy for the first time for seven weeks. There might, after all, be no need for her to worry. It could only be a few

weeks and she and Graham would be married, with their anxieties at the back of them.

"I think it's Mr. Moreton," the maid was telling her.

Eagerly Joan leapt up from the window-seat and ran downstairs into the hall.

"Yes, it's Joan Faversham speaking. Who is that?"

It was a breathless, excited voice that answered her.

"It's me, Graham; can I come round and see you?"

"Of course. When?"

"I'm at Hammersmith Broadway. I've got the car. Not more than eleven minutes. I'll push straight on."

Thoughtfully Joan Faversham hung up the receiver. Something unforeseen had happened. It was unlike Graham to ring her up like that. Unlike him too, that hurried, agitated voice.

For a moment her blood pulsed tempestuously through her veins. Could it be that he had come to tell her the news for which she had so long waited: his permanent transference to the London office? On knees that trembled a little she climbed upstairs towards the drawing-room.

Not to read, though. She could not at such a moment have relaxed to the portrayal of another's life; now when her own had become of such intense excitement. She sat huddled in the corner of the window-seat, her hands clasped round her knees, waiting for Graham's car to swing round the corner into sight. Could it be such news that he had come to tell her: the news she had waited for so long?

It was not that. The moment he came into the room she realized that it was not that. His hair was ruffled; under his eyes there was a rim of dust. His collar and his tie were disarranged. He was breathless and he was agitated, but not through such excited

happiness as would, had that been the case, have been written across every feature of his face.

"I'm in an awful mess, I'm afraid," he excused himself. "I've been driving rather fast." And he laughed nervously.

Anxiously, intently, her eyes were fixed on him.

"What have you come to see me for?" she asked.

"See you for, but . . . what should I come to see you for? What in particular, I mean?" And again he laughed, embarrassed by the puzzled scrutiny of her glance.

"I see," she said quietly. Then: "I expect you'd like a whisky-and-soda, wouldn't you? I'll ring."

But he shook his head.

"No, no," he said, "I don't want anything."

"The cigarettes," she told him, "are on that small table to your left."

"Thanks," he said, lifted the lid of the silver box, took out a cigarette, and tapped the tip of it against the table. His hand shook a little as he did so. "I went as far as Staines and back," he said, "in fifty minutes."

She made no reply, and, to cover his embarrassment, he spoke rapidly in short, jerked-out sentences of other distances covered at an equal speed. But all the while he was conscious of her intent, puzzled scrutiny; all the while he was conscious of her sitting huddled in the window-seat waiting for him to say the thing that he had come to say.

He did not look at her as he was speaking, but her eyes all the time had not, he knew, shifted from his face. Slowly the spate of words subsided, and there was silence between them—a tense, nerve-charged silence.

"Look here," he said at length, "that wasn't true."

She nodded her head. There was no need to ask him what.

"There was something," he continued, "that I came to ask you."

He was leaning forward now, his elbow rested upon his knees; the cigarette that he was smoking crushed between his fingers. Some struggle or other, she could see, was going on within him, and sickeningly, as she waited for him to speak, the feet of fear walked round her.

Had she been right and Christopher wrong, then, after all? Was there some other woman that Graham loved, and was it this that he had come to tell her? Well, and if it was, if it was to be freed from his engagement that he had come to her, there would be nothing for her but to keep her voice level, and her eyes dry, and to prevent her fingers from fluttering at her side.

"I understand, Graham," she would say, "I'm glad you've told me, and I'm very glad that you've found out your mistake in time. It's saved us both a great deal of pain. Don't feel unhappy about it. Don't think you've treated me unfairly. You'd have treated me far more unfairly if you hadn't told me."

And she would stretch out her hand to him, and they would part as friends, and he would never know how much had died in her that evening.

"I've come to tell you——" he was saying. "I've come to say——" He hesitated, then finished the sentence in a rush: "It can't," he said, "go on any longer."

So it had been that, then. He no longer loved her; or, at least, loved some other woman more: he no longer wanted her, and their engagement must be at an end. As she waited for the next sentence she closed her eyes as will prisoners sometimes at an execution, so as not to know the exact moment at which the blow will fall.

"It can't go on any longer," he repeated. "We've got to get married, Joan, at once."

She blinked, as one does when an electric torch is flashing suddenly into one's eyes.

"M-married!" she stammered. "B-but you haven't got that job yet, Graham?"

He shook his head.

"No, no, not yet, and I don't know when I shall, and we've been waiting for thirty months now nearly, and I can't go on waiting any more." And, jumping from his chair, he turned, to fall on his knees beside her. "Joan darling," he pleaded, "please!"

With soft caressing fingers she stroked his hair. Through eyes misted with happiness, the outlines of the room showed vaguely. "Darling!" she whispered, and pressed his head tightly against her knees.

"And you will, Joan, won't you?" he was saying. "We've waited so long—too long. We're missing so much, Jonakin! Why wait?"

They were the words she had so often hungered to hear him say. If only he would feel as I feel, she had thought. If only he wouldn't put so many other things before our love. One has no right to be practical when one's in love. But now that the words were unsaid no longer, now that he had witnessed by his saying of them to the extent of her power over him, it was for her, she felt, to be practical and worldly-wise, for her to save him from the unconsidered consequences of his love.

"It won't be so very long, Graham," she said quietly.

"We've been saying that," he answered, "for two years. The days pass and nothing happens, and the weeks grow into months, and the strain is intolerable. If you knew, Jonakin, how hard it was! Over two years, and when one cares so much!"

So Christopher had been right. And a quiet, contented little sigh fluttered between her lips.

"I do understand, Graham," she said softly, and her hand, as she spoke, did not cease to caress his hair. "I understand, and if it were only that, if it were the strain, if it were that strain only. Well, Graham, dear, you know that from the moment I said I loved

you I belonged to you, and that I shan't be made any the more yours by the few words that are to be said over us. If it were simply that . . . but I don't think, Graham, it is just that. That's only a part of it."

"Yes, yes," he said wretchedly. "But . . ."

"No, no, Graham, let me finish. That's only a part of it. And we've got the whole of our lives in front of us. If I had known two years ago that we should have to wait as long as this I don't think I should have been so ready to accept my father's point of view. It's been a long time and a hard time, and I haven't found it easy. It might have been better very likely for us to have married then. But it would be silly when we have waited so long to lose heart now. It can't be very much longer, Graham. And we don't want to marry with the feeling that at any moment you may be rushed abroad."

He waved his hands excitedly.

"That's what we've so often said: that we've been so wrong to say. We're sacrificing our best years; and for what? for comfort, ease, position. What are they to be set against our loving of each other?"

He spoke fiercely, hysterically. His hands were clasped tightly about her knees. His eyes were wild and bright.

"Graham," she said, "Graham."

"I know, I know," and the words were almost shouted. "I know all the arguments that are to be brought forward. Haven't I marshalled them myself a hundred times? And there's nothing in them, nothing, nothing. Not in a single one of them."

The tide of happiness in Joan's heart was slightly ebbing. There was something curiously unreal in the intensity of his pleading. Alarm had taken the place of content. She had fixed again on him that look of intent and puzzled scrutiny.

"We mustn't wait. It'll be madness for us to wait any longer. We're flinging away our happiness. For what, for nothing!"

Sentence after sentence, wildly, inconsequently, through its cycle of repetition, the storm of arguments poured on. And all the while softly, soothingly, Joan's fingers passed and repassed through the tangles of Graham's hair. Her eyes were no longer misted. Clearly enough showed through the room's half darkness, the gleaming edge of cabinet and table.

"We mustn't wait, Joan, it'll be madness. Let's get married at once. Let's run away if need be, only don't let's wait!"

And as the heat and force of his talk quickened, sickeningly again the feet of fear trod round her. So he was in love, then, with another woman. It was not love that had loosed this torrent of avowals: it was not because he was half-wild with love of her, that he was at her feet now, pleading with her to marry him. It was fear of someone else that was driving him to this fury of protestation.

This was not the uncontrol of passion; it was the desperate attempt of a frightened man to save himself. It was the knowledge that, if he were married to her, he would be safe from the spell of that other woman. This it was that had driven him breathless and dishevelled to such wild-tongued courtship.

"Promise me, Joan darling," he was saying, "promise me; you must, you must!"

And as she sat silent beside him there, while the strength of this rival passion lifted through every tortured sentence its increasing measure, slowly, insidiously, the temptation came to her to put to her own use this hour of unbalanced tempest. He was her man after all; the man she wanted. And what if she were to repeat now to him in his present mood that offer of herself made tentatively a few minutes earlier: what if she were to take advantage of this mad moment in this empty house: if she were to place on him that obligation which he would be unable ever to deny? That obligation against which this unknown rival could fight in vain? For a moment, insidiously, the

temptation came to her. For a moment to be put away.

No, no, she told herself, it would not do; she could get him that way if she wanted, get him to keep him for her own. But if she did, she would despise herself for ever.

"I fight clean," she thought, "whosoever it's against."

And so with cool hands and quiet words she soothed him back to reason.

"You mustn't worry," she said. "I'm yours, you know, whatever happens."

The kiss with which they parted had little enough of passion in it. It was such a kiss as brothers might exchange who separate before a long, uncertain hazard. A kiss of comradeship and pity. And there was heavy dread and sorrow in Joan's heart as she stood on the doorstep watching the car curve outwards out of sight. Where was he going? To what dark forest of adventure had she dismissed him?

And in his heart, too, was dread and sorrow.

"I've done my best," he said. "I'll go on doing it. Yet it may be that things are going to be too strong for me."

CHAPTER XV

CHRISTOPHER INTERVENES

THERE were four roll sandwiches upon the plate at Geoffrey Brackenridge's side. He had eaten already six, and was not feeling in the least hungry. Tea, moreover, he had long since recognized to be not a meal but an act of social courtesy. Were he, however, to eat the remaining sandwiches he would not need another meal till ten o'clock, so that by visiting the coffee stall at Hyde Park Corner he would be able to sup at the most for one and sixpence, which would be a saving of three shillings on the club dinner to which he would have had otherwise to resort. And these things had to be considered at a time when the margin of ten per cent on which he had based his calculations was proving woefully inadequate.

He had not calculated on Sybyl Marchant in his budget.

His fixed annual expenses left him with a balance of six hundred pounds, or twelve pounds a week for pocket-money. The type of entertainment to which he had accustomed Sybyl during their courtship rarely left him at the end of the evening with much change out of ten pounds. On four at least of the remaining six days of the week Sybyl would expect to be amused in some way or other, if not by him, then by some other man, and he dared not talk to her of economy.

He knew so exactly how she would behave.

She would not argue with him; she would not protest; she would stand still and straight before him, listening to what he had to say. Her head, when he had finished, would be bent slowly forward. "You

are very wise, Geoffrey," she would say. " It would be stupid of you to spend money on me that you cannot afford." She would not argue or protest, but in her eyes would be a reproach he dared not face. He would know what she was thinking.

" When you were uncertain of me," she would be saying to herself, " you never considered the amount of money that you spent. Every night that I would come with you, you took me to a theatre and to supper afterwards. You spent very possibly during those months a great deal more money than you could afford. But it seemed worth it then : because you were uncertain of me. Now that you have got what you wanted, that expense seems to you no longer necessary : you have bought the article you set out to buy : as in one way or another that particular thing always is bought, in your case with dinners and dances and theatres. It is yours now, so you need not bother any longer."

That criticism he dared not face : the suggestion that during his days of courtship he had been buying Sybyl in the same way, if in a different market, that other men bought other women. To preserve his self-respect and the dignity of his love for her, it was essential for him to spend as much money on Sybyl now as he had ever done. As much money if not more.

" If ever I have a son," he said, " I shall send him out into the world with this advice : Never spend more on a girl during the first two months of your acquaintance than you will be in a position to afford after you have known her a year."

There had, moreover, been trouble about Sybyl's flat. He couldn't quite understand what had happened, but apparently her housekeeper had complained about the lateness and frequency of his visits. Sybyl had been in tears.

" It's no good," she had said. " I can't face that sort of criticism. We can't go on meeting here."

And the trouble was that he didn't quite know where else they were to meet. His own flat was out of the question. When he returned to London in the spring of 1919 he had been at particular pains to choose an establishment where it would be impossible for a companion to spend the night. It had proved a very wise precaution. One must not, if one was to have any peace, let oneself become involved, and if women stayed one night they might stay a hundred. One must never allow them to take root or one might just as well be married. One must protect oneself. And he had never had reason to regret his prescience. It did appear, however, at the moment to be forcing upon him the responsibility of establishing Sybyl Marchant in a place where complaints were unlikely to be made.

"I can't afford," she had said, "a larger place."

It would be for him therefore to pay the difference. It was inevitable but awkward.

Unquestionably three shillings had become worth saving. He stretched out a hand towards the sandwiches.

As he did so, he became conscious from the other end of the room of Christopher Stirling's amused and ironic glance.

"My dear Geoffrey," Christopher murmured, "what an appetite! How much I would give to feel genuine hunger again. It's a sensation I've quite outgrown. I overeat and take no exercise, whereas you spend your whole time playing golf. I suppose you've got your handicap into single figures now."

Geoffrey flushed; in a rather embarrassed manner, Christopher thought.

"I'm not playing much golf nowadays."

"No?"

"I've taken up tennis."

"Ah, the royal game, and where? Prince's or Queen's or Lord's?"

Geoffrey shook his head.

"Oh no, only lawn. Sybyl, you see," he added lamely, "doesn't much care for golf."

Christopher raised his eyebrows. It was a curious admission from the man who was going to pigeon-hole love. But then, Christopher reflected, he had had no idea that an affair was going to develop into love. Still, it was none of his business.

"So I suppose," he said, "that it'll be at Wimbledon instead of St. Andrews that you'll be taking prizes. How I envy you your leisure. I have no time for any of these things. I haven't even time," he added in a louder voice, seeing that his hostess was standing a few feet from him, "to stay a minute longer at this delightful party. While the light lasts I cannot be idle."

And with a lazy smile he turned away to leave Geoffrey in unchallenged control of the remaining sandwiches.

. . . . . .

It was not, however, to Ralston Street but to Ciber Crescent that he turned the steering wheel of his Armstrong Siddely. It was time, he felt, that he had a chat with Mrs. Lawrence.

It was the first time that he had called on her: the first time indeed that he had seen her since the morning of his cocktail party. She had not been since, and he had often wondered why she had come at all. Not to see him apparently. She had scarcely spoken a word to him the whole time. And she had made no effort during the intervening months to resume their friendship.

It had been a curious affair altogether; there had been too the awkward moment with Joan Faversham about that business lunch with Graham at Romano's. What business could they have been discussing there? Unless it was for her that he had taken those shares and in his name. Oh, well, that point, at any rate, he could settle up.

It was a little before six that his long, low-bodied car drew up before Gwen's flat.

"I felt suddenly thirsty," he explained, "just as I was coming out of The Times Book Club, and I couldn't think of any address nearer than yours where I should be likely to get a decent cocktail. I was also," he added, "feeling a little lonely."

She smiled.

"I wish you'd feel lonelyish more often."

"Or that you'd feel thirsty occasionally on Sunday morning!"

"Ah, Christopher, those cocktail parties! But that's not my world, you know, any longer."

"And what is your world?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"This, I suppose," and she made a sweeping inclusive gesture with her hand. "This, and all this stands for. Your cocktail, though," she asked, "what is it to be, or will you mix it?"

"Anything you like, and you mix it. You understand your shaker and I don't. They're all different, you know, like golf clubs and motor-cars. They look alike enough in shops: but by the time you've had them a month they've become a part of you."

She looked at him, and as their eyes met she smiled; an affectionate, rather wistful smile.

"You're the old Chris," she said. "I don't know that you've altered much."

"No?"

"Not as I have, anyhow!" and, turning aside, she bent down to open the sideboard.

"Would you think it rude," he asked, "if I took one glance at that copy of the paper which I see lying across your sofa? I've just bought some shares and I quite forgot to look and see what they were standing at this morning."

"Gambling?"

"Not seriously, just a few pennies in Florida."

"Florida!" she exclaimed. "I've just bought some things in Florida."

"Then that," he said, "is another thing we have in common."

There was no need for him to look at the paper now. He rustled the pages casually, then laid them down, and, leaning back in the velvet-covered chair beside the fireplace, he watched Gwen Lawrence peel away the inch or so of lemon on whose flavour the martini relies for its success. Her back was turned towards him, and he wondered if he had ever seen anything lovelier than the curve of her neck and shoulder as she bent forward above the glasses.

Altered? But had she altered, after all, so much? Her figure was perhaps a little fuller; the dark mane of hair a little darker, but her eyes, the piercing amber eyes, the smooth white surface of her cheek, the soft, full, damson-coloured mouth, they were what they had always been. It was within, not without, that the change was working.

"There you are," she said. "Here's to all of us!" and turning she held out to him the small frosted glass; it was cold, but not so cold that you could not taste the flavour of lemon through it.

"Perfect," he said. "Most people's cocktails are either warm like syrup, or so frozen that you are only aware of ice and alcohol. I must come more often."

"I'm usually here," she told him, "about this time."

There was a moment's silence. A silence though in which there was no embarrassment, from which it was easy to pass at will.

"And is life amusing you?" he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Amusing me?" she said. "I don't know what you mean by that. It doesn't disappoint me any longer. I don't ask enough of it for that."

He looked round the room; at its thick carpet, its heavy curtains, its deeply-sprung cushioned divan.

" At any rate, you look pretty comfortable," he said.

" Comfortable, oh yes. All the material things. And, short of a revolution, I'm pretty safe, I suppose. I get given a good deal, you know, one way and another."

" But——"

" I don't know if there is a ' but.' You'll say, perhaps, that it's spoiling me for the big thing. But what is that big thing? And when does it come? People talk about affinities. But who's met their affinity? Have you or I or any of us? Occasionally one gets excited, but that isn't love. And about once in a lifetime one cares fearfully and gets hurt. One gives so much then that one hasn't any more to give."

She shrugged her shoulders.

" No, no, Chris," she said, " it's a myth that big thing they talk about. To keep one's lip stiff and not to whine: not to let life get on top of you, and if it does, to go down against it fighting: that's all there is to it. That's all, anyhow, I see in it for myself."

The dead pallor of her cheek was unmoved by any flush; but in her eyes the changing amber lights were shaken. And in her throat falteringly the small pulse throbbed. " You're brave," Christopher thought. " Whatever they may say against you, that they can't deny you. Life's hit you and you've hit back; blow for blow. If you haven't given pity, you haven't asked for it." A big woman, in her way, and probably life hadn't finished with her yet.

For a moment or two more they lingered talking; then Christopher rose to go.

" Thank you so much," he said. " One day soon I'll be coming back again. In the meantime, can I give you a lift anywhere? "

She shook her head.

" I'm being called for, thanks."

" Another victim? "

She laughed.

"How should I know? He seems to want my company. When nobody more important needs it he can have it. It's all he's likely to get."

"Ah, Gwen, the eternal Lilith, but tell me now, do you see anything of Graham Moreton?"

"Um, a little."

"And is that wise?"

She pouted.

"Are you going to assume the responsibility of a long friendship and deliver an address?"

"Have you ever known me moralize?"

"You usen't to. But the years make puritans of us all."

Violently above the door the telephone bell began to ring.

"Again," she murmured. "I'd better say good-bye. These interruptions are apt to be a little lengthy. And don't worry about your little friend. I'm merely trying to find out whether he's like all the rest of you or not. At times I almost think he isn't. But sooner or later I'm sure to find out he is."

"And if you were to discover that he wasn't?" Christopher murmured to himself, as he walked down the steps into the sunlight towards the car. Things might happen if she were to discover that Graham wasn't.

Still, it was scarcely his job, he supposed. The wheels went round, with oneself a spoke in them, but he rather hoped that life was not going to be too cruel to Joan Faversham. Once, after all, Gwen Lawrence had been like that. Young and confident and happy. Fresh and generous-hearted, ready to give with both her hands. Till a man had let her down, and she had had to forge that armour for her own salvation; and forging it, become the thing she was. It would be sad if that were to happen to Joan Faversham. For it might, if Graham were to let her down. She might, as Gwen had done, have given so much that she had not

any more to give or, rather, the urge, perhaps, to give would go.

It was all very well for the shallow people: they could make and unmake love as easily as they changed their clothing. But when love once took root in deep natures like Joan and Gwen, it had to be torn out. Joan might become like Gwen if Graham were to let her down.

It would hurt him rather a lot, were that to happen.

Years back, at a moment of not dissimilar indecision, he had made up his mind never, under any circumstances, to take part in any business that was not his. Nor had an occasion ever come to test that resolution. He had listened, but he had not interfered. He was an observer, not a participant. Let other people make of their lives such chaos as they chose. They were their own lives after all.

But now, for the first time since that far and dateless period of adolescence, an impulse not to acquiesce, not to submit to life's authority, rose gustily within him. What reason might urge of the futility, of the assumption of interference, the desire to protect Joan Faversham from disenchantment mastered it.

What Joan was now Gwen Lawrence had been once. And what Gwen was now Joan Faversham might in her turn become.

"And that's a thing," he said, "that is well worth fighting to prevent."

. . . . . .

A man of as many tastes, as much leisure and as conveniently proportioned an income as Christopher Stirling's, not only has a very large acquaintance, but is also able through familiarity with a great many different phases of the social comedy to tell with a tolerable degree of accuracy what any single person is doing at any single moment.

Elias Garlich was, he knew, one of the principal directors of the firm for which Graham Moreton was working. He was also a married man, some sixty-six

years old, and a member of the Gregorian Club. He would leave his office, that was to say, shortly after six; he would not be dining till eight. There would be nothing in particular for him to do at his own house, and as he had reached an age and weight at which the encounters of the heart were not likely to require more than an intellectual exercise, he would presumably pass the intervening period in his club; in the card-room probably, but possibly in the billiard-room.

"So I think," Christopher added to himself, "that I might do worse than avail myself this evening of the privileges to which my annual subscription of fifteen guineas entitles me."

His prophecy was not unjustified. Slowly, jerkily, and with many pauses for the recovery of expended breath, at twenty-two and a quarter minutes to seven, Elias Garlich completed his climb of the main staircase of the Gregorian Club.

On the landing at its head Christopher Stirling was standing in apparently concentrated study of the afternoon's fortunes on the turf. As the uneven steps drew close to him he turned.

"Ah, Mr. Garlich," he said, "what a piece of fortune! I was wondering whether I should see you here this afternoon. I don't know if a club is the proper place for the discussion of business, but I would be very grateful if I might ask your advice on a particular matter."

Elias Garlich grunted. He was out of breath, and he was tired, and he did not care to discuss business outside offices.

"Well," he said, "what is it?"

"Perhaps," Christopher suggested, "it would be better if we went into the smoking-room annexe. It was empty a moment or two ago."

Wheezily the old man followed him, to lower himself laboriously into a chair.

"Well?" he growled.

"It's nothing in particular," Christopher answered.

"It was merely that I was thinking of taking up a share or two in your company. Oh, I know," he added hurriedly, "that to you it is a matter of complete indifference who may or may not hold shares in your company. You are independent of shareholders. But I thought perhaps you would be so very kind as to advise me as to the sort of sum I ought to pay for shares. They are not quoted on the Stock Exchange, and though I have, of course, seen your last few balance sheets, it isn't easy for me to tell."

In their heavily-lidded pouches the grey eyes of Elias Garlich glittered.

"What sort of shares," he muttered, "preference or ordinary?"

"Ordinary."

Contentedly Elias Garlich nodded his head. He was always glad to add a friend or at least an acquaintance, to the list of his ordinary shareholders. The preference fellows were all right. They got their money and didn't grumble. But with these ordinary holders you never knew quite where you were, however well the business might be doing. They always expected more than they were getting. It was as well to have as many friends as possible on the other side of the table. And this young man was not the sort of person to prove troublesome.

"How much should you pay?" he answered. "Between fifty-three and fifty-seven, I should say."

"Fifty-three and fifty-seven." Christopher wrinkled his brows as though he were memorizing the figures. "Thank you very much," he said. "I expect I'll be getting one or two. Not that it makes much difference to you, sir, I suppose."

"I wouldn't say that, I wouldn't say that," the old man answered. "After all, the shareholders are the proprietors of the business. We're their employees really. And one prefers to be working for one's friends. By the way," he added, as Christopher

prepared to rise, "how was it that you got the idea of taking shares in us?"

The reply came casually enough.

"Through a young friend of mine. I don't know if you know him—Graham Moreton."

"Moreton? I know him very well, a most capable young fellow."

Christopher nodded, as though the interest of the incident were completely impersonal to him.

"I'm glad you think so. That's what I've always thought. They tell me that you're putting him in charge of one of your London departments shortly."

Closely, as he spoke the words, Christopher watched the face of his companion. And he was relieved to see that there was no sign of denial or surprise in it. If only Graham could be given that job definitely, so that he could marry Joan: if only that were to happen, Gwen and all that Gwen stood for, would be a chapter that had been read through.

"In charge of a London department?" Elias Garlich was saying. "Well, I don't know that I'd say that exactly. In time, perhaps, in time."

"In time? But unless he gets offered it quickly, someone else will be offering him something better, and it would be a pity to lose him, with the connections he's built up. He'd probably take them with him. I believe he was made a thundering good offer by someone the other day."

It was quite untrue, but Elias Garlich was not to know it was.

"Eh? What?" he said testily. "Another offer, you say? Who from?"

But Christopher was unprepared to show any signs of more than ordinary interest.

"I forget," he said, "someone was telling me about it. And I remember thinking to myself at the time, that if you people didn't freeze on to Moreton pretty quick someone else would. But I mustn't waste

your time," he finished. " It's so kind of you to have given me that advice. It'll be fearfully useful."

The climax had been reached, the conversation had been carried as far as he could safely carry it. And he knew the technique of the stage too well to prolong a scene that had exhausted its capacities for drama.

" I'll tell you," he said, " how much I manage to get those shares for."

And with a smile and a wave of the hand he turned aside to leave Elias Garlich thinking.

He had put the idea into the old man's head; had started the train of thought that should result in Graham's appointment to this job in London which would enable him to marry.

" And when once Joan's got him," he told himself, " all the other women in the world won't be able to get him from her. In another three weeks Joan should be safe."

CHAPTER XVI

THE ENCHANTED HOURS

"SHALL I bring you your breakfast in here, darling, or in the dining-room?"

Gwen Lawrence was seated at her dressing-table, heightening the polish of her nails with savage sweeps. She had been restless and slept badly, and had risen only a few minutes after May Julian.

"I don't care," she answered irritably, "wherever you'd prefer."

"But surely, darling——"

Impatiently Gwen tapped the leather pad against the table. There were times when May Julian became positively maddening.

"Whichever you please, I said."

"Very well, darling."

A moment later she was back.

"Would you like your eggs poached or scrambled, darling?"

"I don't care."

"Surely, darling——"

"Is it quite necessary," Gwen snapped, "to call me darling every time you open your mouth?"

May Julian's mouth fell open in a silly gape.

"Darling——" she began.

Gwen stamped her foot.

"For heaven's sake don't worry me," she cried.

Surely the woman could appreciate that there were times at which one wanted to be left alone: when one didn't want to be fussed round and darlinged: when

all one asked for was to be left in peace! Wearily she drew the back of her hand across her forehead. How her head ached! And there were red rims of fire round her eyes.

"Would you like kidneys or bacon, darling?"

It was more than she could stand.

"For God's sake," she shouted; and jumping to her feet, she swung round towards the door. "Can't you for one moment leave me alone?" she cried. "You fuss and pester round me. You make yourself a doormat. I'm rude to you. I'm unkind to you. It makes no difference to you. You like it; that's what it is; you like it!" Her voice rose in a hysterical crescendo, through a bloodshot mist the wide-eyed and pale-faced girl shrunk cowering before her. "You like it," she screamed. "You like it." She had no longer any control over herself. Without knowing what she did she struck blindly with her open palm at the white, submissive face. Beneath her hand the cool flesh shuddered. Her finger-tips tingled with a maddening frenzy, again and again she struck. "You like it, you like that too," she cried, laughing as the pale skin reddened. "You like it, you like that too."

Then suddenly she felt weak; weak and faint, as though she were going to be sick. The floor swung up towards her. She did not know whether she wanted to laugh or cry. There was a softness, a reeling softness under her. Eau-de-Cologne was being splashed upon her forehead. May Julian's arms were round her. A tear-stained voice was murmuring in her ear:

"You didn't mean it, darling, you didn't mean it."

"No, no," she was answering between her sobs. "No, no, I didn't mean it."

"You're all I've got," the voice was murmuring. "I love you. You don't know how I love you. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you. Nothing, nothing, I love you so, I love you."

Gradually under the gentle impact of those

murmuring words the shuddering succession of sobs sank to an even breathing.

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With a soft thud the front door closed behind May Julian, and with a sigh of relief Gwen Lawrence lifted herself out of bed, and walked over to her dressing-table. From the three-flanked mirror a pale-faced reflection looked at her.

"Can that be me?" she asked herself. "Can I be that: that woman who was screaming and yelling in this room an hour ago? Can that be me?"

In all her life she could not recall one occasion when she had behaved in a manner anything approaching that. But then, never in her life before had she been the centre of so exacting a set of circumstances. The strain was becoming too tense for her. If only she had not met Graham Moreton. It was only since Graham had come into her life that she had found so inexpressibly distasteful the conditions that had governed it.

Yes, Graham was different. At first she had thought he wasn't. And she had meant to make him suffer for not being.

She had made him suffer right enough. A man may lie with his lips, but his eyes will tell the truth, and Graham's eyes had told her that, if he were not actually in love, he was near enough in love to be wretched for the loss of her.

Yes; she had made him suffer; but at the cost of suffering herself.

And as she leant forward, her forehead pressed against her hands, the loneliness of which she had only recently been conscious, the loneliness for someone who could understand and love her, that someone who would let her be herself, with whom she could be herself, rose stiflingly within her.

As a drowning sailor desperately, without reflection, snatches at the spar that drifts across him, she flung out her hand sideways towards the telephone; and with

lips that quivered repeated the number that five months back Graham had scrawled for her on a piece of cardboard.

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For Graham, too, the morning had been passing slowly. There are easier places than London in mid-summer, when blue skies and sun-splashed spaces are evocative every hour of the day of mystery and romance: easier places when the key to adventure is a number of the telephone that is at your side.

So far he had managed to succeed. For a month now he had not seen her. "I will not go," he told himself, "to Ciber Crescent. Florida Asiatics may rise or fall. Contango days may come and go. I will not go there. When the time comes for a decision I will ring her up."

For at the present time he knew he was not strong enough to ring her up. His resolution before the sound of that voice along the wire would subside. He would find himself stammering out the suggestion that he should call and discuss the problem with her. And once again, like a net, the spell of her fascination would be cast about him. If, however, he had the power of will to allow six weeks or perhaps a month even to pass without his seeing her, he would be able to accustom his mind to the idea of not seeing her. One could save, as one could kill, oneself by habit.

The bell at his elbow tinkled. He took up the receiver.

"Graham Moreton speaking," he answered.

"How terribly formal that does sound," and from the other end of the line came that short, broken, so fatally familiar laugh.

"Gwen," he gasped.

"Graham," she echoed in half-mocking imitation.

But he was incapable of reply. He felt weak and frightened and irresolute. And at the same time resolute. And at the same time indescribably at peace.

"I suppose," Gwen was continuing, "that I've interrupted you in the middle of some fearfully important conference!"

"Oh no," he said. "As a matter of fact, at the moment there isn't a great deal on."

"Splendid! I was picturing you with a circle of venerable gentlemen round you, wondering who on earth it was that was having the impertinence to interrupt them. I'm glad that there's not much on, because in that case you'll be able to leave your office early and take me for a drive. It's a shame to waste a day like this in London."

"But," he began, "but——"

"Now, now," she said, "you aren't to start pretending that you've got no more independence than an office-boy. You've often said to me that as long as you get your work done your people don't in the least mind when you do it. So you can cut your lunch to-day. Get four hours' work done in two, and pick me up at Ciro's at ten past three. I'll be lunching with a Mr. Fortescue. So that's settled, Graham, isn't it? *À bientôt*," and the receiver was replaced.

Helplessly Graham drew his fingers through his hair.

"Oh, well," he thought, "sooner or later I suppose it had to happen."

. . . . . .

Like most busy people. Graham was invariably punctual. At eight and a half minutes past three he steered his car into the narrow passage of Orange Street.

"I have called," he informed the large, liveried commissionaire, "for the lady who is lunching with Mr. Fortescue."

There was a summoning of page-boys, a repetition of instructions, then a long pause.

"The lady," a page-boy ultimately told him, "will be with you in a minute, sir."

The minute was translated into a quarter of an hour.

Then through the half-open doorway he saw Gwen saying good-bye to the man whom she had brought with her to Joan's dance. And as Graham watched her smile up into his face a spasm of jealousy passed through him. Who was this man, with the infernally proprietary attitude, with whom she appeared to be spending so much of her time?

In another moment she was with him.

"I'm very sorry, Graham," she was saying, "but I arrived here so disgracefully late that I couldn't leave the poor pet too soon. Where are you taking me?"

"Where would you like to go?"

She shook her head.

"I don't care: anywhere you like. I'm not in any hurry to be back."

And so because as long as they were together it did not really matter where they went, because also neither of them had been there before, they agreed that Dorking would be as good a place as any for them to go to.

"There's a place near there," she said, "called Friday Street. I'm told it's rather lovely."

It is a good hour's run to Dorking, and Friday Street is some six or seven miles beyond it. But they spoke hardly a word during their drive.

After the uneasy turmoil of the days during which they had not seen each other, the hours of repression and restraint, they were experiencing the relief of self-surrender; with the consequences of that surrender, gay or calamitous as they might choose to be, still far distant.

"This is the first time," he once remarked, "that we've ever been anywhere together; since that first day, at least, when we lunched together. It's curious, you know."

"But then," she replied, "ours has only been a business acquaintance."

"Acquaintance, not more than that?"

"It's always better," she said, "to understate."

There may be lovelier counties in the world than Surrey. There may be in Surrey even lovelier places, but on a tranquil July evening when the sky above the pine trees is a blurred mingling of lavender and lilac, when the long shadows and the declining sunlight lie softly on the waveless water and the wooded coverts that slope down to it, when over the fields that stretch to Wooton a golden haze is settling, Friday Street has something of the enchanted fabric of one of those dream places that the magicians of old time created for the gilding of a moment's splendour, to destroy when the bright moment was at an end.

So calm, so still, so self-contained in the casket of its own beauty, you cannot believe that it exists on ordinary days, when the skies are grey and the trees leafless, that it is here to be viewed and passed by at any hour of the week by any casual loiterer. It exists, you feel, for you alone at this marvellous moment of the day's suspension, and when you have gone it will vanish as dreams vanish.

At the edge of the lake there is a little inn, and in the narrow garden that is in front of it Graham and Gwen sat for a long time over the tea that had been prepared for them.

"It's so lovely," said Graham, "that one can scarcely believe it's real."

And because it seemed to be apart from the reality they knew, the reality of obligations and professions, and carefully nurtured plans, they felt themselves to be on a plane where the conditions that governed the practical ordering of their lives were without meaning, a plane where they could speak without reservations of what they felt, instead of what it was prudent for them to feel.

"You say it isn't real," she said, "but I'm not sure that the thing we take for real is real at all; that the thing we call reality isn't a cloak we're needing to be rid of; that these are not the real moments."

She leant forward across the table, in that familiar pose of hers, with her chin rested on the bridge of her interlaced fingers.

"Isn't this far more real," she said, "than money and office and position? This beauty that we're looking at may be transient, the effects of certain colours through a certain atmosphere on certain surfaces. Even as we look at it, it changes. But then, is there anything about us or within us that isn't on its way to an ultimate dispersal? And don't we spend the whole of our lives laboriously creating things—homes, reputations, businesses—that sooner or later the world will have no use for?"

She paused, and as they sat there side by side, through the mind of each of them the same thoughts passed.

Just for this moment, in the presence of supreme beauty, they were able to see that those things they set such store by—homes, reputations, businesses—did not matter; that there was in the perfection of this moment an eternal quality that careers and the allaying of ambition do not possess. And yet they both knew that, when they had got back again into the world they'd managed to escape, they would forget this moment. They would start considering again those other things to be more important. The enlargement of an office, the knowing of useful people, the avoidance of useless ones, the extent of a bank balance, the protection of one's infirmity and age; promotion and influence and respect —those were the things that would seem reality to them to-morrow.

And clearly in that far-sighted moment it was possible for them to realize how here they could be friends, as in that world they could never be. Here they were free to say what they liked and do what they liked, because those other things had ceased to matter to them. But that when they were back again, where those things did matter, they could only be friends to one another by ceasing to be friends to other people.

In a practical world, friendship, like everything else, had to fit into a formula.

"We're neither of us," she said, "free, you know."

It was a moment that at a later stage in a relationship must have been the prelude either to a torrent of enraptured kisses, or a long discussion of their exact position and of the steps to be taken for the disposal of it.

But they had not got to that stage yet. They were in the mood neither to make love to one another nor to decide what course they were to follow. It was enough at this moment to realize the nature of their position. It was enough in this interval of unspoilt friendship to sit side by side leaning forward over the small wooden table of a village inn, and watch the lilac of the sky deepen into purple, to watch the mist from the fields rise towards the trees, till the faintly waving tops seemed to have been severed from their trunks, to stand suspended in the golden haze that, as the sun sank, slowly reddened; to watch the copper of the lake dull and darken into bronze.

"If we'd been free when we met," he said at length, "we might not perhaps be meaning quite so much to one another now. There'd have been less to fight against."

Slowly the air began to chill.

"It's time we were going back," she said, and with a little shiver she drew her cloak the tighter round her.

They had said little enough to one another on the journey down. They were even more silent on the journey back.

Gradually, as the spaces between the houses along the road diminished, as they drew nearer to the noise and lights of London, the realization came to them of the irrevocable nature of what had passed that afternoon between them.

Although so little actually had been said, although they had not even touched hands the whole day through,

they had passed the most important perhaps of all stages in a personal relationship. The stage where two people, who have met hitherto as acquaintances casually, confess that they feel for one another emotions separate and distinct from those of any ordinary friendship, that what they mean to each other, be it much or little, is something that no other person in the world at that moment means to them.

Until now there had passed no word between them singling each other out from the crowd of their acquaintance. But in the admission that they were not free, there had been, even if unstated, the suggestion that they could wish they were.

CHAPTER XVII

TOO LATE

"THOSE, sir, are my final terms. It you are prepared to take over the use of that patent for twenty years, I will reduce the royalty as you suggest, but for a period of less than twenty years I cannot part with it."

And with a smile, Elias Garlich leant back in his chair, crossing his hands comfortably across the curved expanses of his waistcoat.

The man opposite him hesitated.

"Those are hard terms, Mr. Garlich."

The smile on Mr. Garlich's face grew wider and more benign.

"You are," he said, "under no obligation to accept them. It is to me a matter of complete indifference.

And he chuckled, wondering whether the hatchet-faced man beside him realized the irony of the situation; that they, in the last decade of their lives should be battling over royalties that would not be paid till they had been in their graves ten years. He was close on seventy himself, and out of these seventy years he'd had a good ninety years of living. The machinery must run down soon. While as for this thin rake of a creature opposite, no, he wasn't the chap to get a second wind; he was the sort that went down suddenly before a chill that becomes pneumonia. And yet here they were, sowing for a harvest they would never reap.

"Well," said Elias Garlich, "well?"

The thin, cadaverous agent of the Imperial Trust rose to his feet.

"You shall have a letter," he said, "confirming our arrangement, by this evening's post."

With twinkling eyes Elias Garlich followed him towards the door. How pleaasnt became the playing of a game when you were indifferent to the result; when success or failure were no more than the brightly coloured counters of a nursery pastime.

Still, it had been good business. And to commemorate it he would buy that rather jolly seascape he had seen at the Jermyn Galleries, which would be the devil of a nice surprise for the wretch who'd painted it. Wonder what he'd say if he knew that the holiday he'd be taking in Liguria depended not on his own skill at all, but on the capacity of a worthless old philistine to dispose of a worthless enamel patent.

There was a tap upon the door.

"Mr. Graham Moreton," his secretary informed him, "would like to see you."

Mr. Garlich waved his podgy fingers in the air.

"He's chosen his time well," he said. "For once I'm in a capital temper."

Graham's entrance was abruptly diffident.

"I've been talking to Mr. Jeremy, sir," he said, "about our Italian orders. He was inclined to agree with me that they did not compare too favourably with the ones we're getting from France and Belgium and Germany."

Elias Garlich was sitting back comfortably in his swivel chair. His hands were crossed upon his stomach. His knees were crossed. There was a twinkle in his eye.

"A fact, Moreton, that had not eluded my attention."

"And it's nearly three years, sir, since I went there. No one, except our ordinary travellers, has been there since. I'm not too certain that the railway companies are

altogether satisfied with us. A few discreet little dinner parties would do a world of good."

To the limited extent that his series of double chins permitted, Elias Garlich nodded his head.

"I agree," he said.

"And I should think, sir," Graham went on, "that it would be as well to make the trip at once, so that we can get our orders in before the autumn."

"Perhaps." There was a mischievous twinkle in his eye and the corners of his mouth were slightly lifted. "I dare say you're right. I think we ought to send someone there."

"Then I'd like to go at once, sir, if I may."

From the depths of Elias Garlich's immense obesity a long chuckle rumbled.

"But whoever said that it was you who would be going there?"

It was one of the most complete surprises that Graham had received.

"But—but——" he stammered.

"I had in mind," Garlich continued, "someone like Ferguson or Evans."

"Surely, sir," Graham began to protest—then paused; a dark and uncomfortable suspicion striking him. "It's always been me, sir," he said, "who's been sent on those expeditions."

"Up to now," his chief conceded.

The shadow of suspicion broadened and lengthened across the surface of Graham's mind.

"Then——"

"Then what, young man?"

"Then you won't be wanting me to do any more of them?" Graham blurted out.

Again the slow chuckle rumbled in that deep throat.

"That is perhaps the meaning I was attempting to convey. You see," he went on—and the twinkle in his eye had deepened—"my fellow-directors and myself had come to the conclusion that you could be far more profitably employed in London. We had thought of

opening a new department for the control of certain sections of our export trade. And it had seemed to us that you would probably be able to supervise it less ineffectively than the majority of our employees. There will be, of course," he added, "some slight increase of salary to compensate for any loss in expenses that might be involved."

The old man was laughing outright now. A great rumbling laugh that started somewhere beneath the fourth button of his waistcoat and echoed through winding cavities on its way towards the throat. The hands that were crossed upon his stomach rose and fell in uneven spasms. He had given that young fellow a shock all right. Thought he had been superseded; thought even that he was going to get the sack, perhaps. That was how he liked to make his promotions; without any parade of investiture, without speeches about duty, and gratitude, and recognition. In an off-hand way, as though one were asking a fellow out to lunch.

And there was that young rascal, now so overcome that he didn't know what to say: just standing there speechless, with his mouth gaping and his eyes bulging. Eh, but it was amusing to have so much power. To be able with a word to make a man wretched with despair or delirious with joy.

"You can start making your arrangements with Coxon," he went on, "as soon as you like; the sooner the better, really. Because I shouldn't be surprised if in a month of two you weren't coming again to me about another holiday."

His eye was twinkling, and the slow chuckle was beginning again to rumble.

"They tell me," he said, "that you've been waiting for a change in your position in the office to make a change in your position out of it. You won't forget to invite me, will you?"

Graham was incapable of reply. The passage into which he stumbled wavered uncertainly before his

tread. There was a fog over his eyes and over his mind. He did not know where he was, nor whither he was going. It was the last thing he had expected. On the night that he had driven back from Friday Sreet he had faced the issue squarely. The length of his engagement, the uncertainty of his future, the hunger for adventure, for wider scope, the sense of something missing; it was by those things that he had allowed himself to imagine his nerves were being strained. But didn't it all in the end come back to this: that he, engaged as he was to Joan, had fallen in love with another woman?

For a long time that night he had lain awake in bed. He was a practical person, and this was a practical question, to be dealt with practically. He had allowed himself to drift, up to now, because he had not realized that he was drifting. The time had come to take the rudder in his hand.

For curiously enough his infatuation did not in any way alter the feelings that he had for Joan. People would tell you that it was impossible to love two people at the same time, but he knew it was possible to love in different ways.

He saw Joan as his life's companion; he saw her as he saw his career, a straight line through his life. They loved each other and understood each other. They had in common a host of friends and interests and inclinations.

With Gwen he had, as far as he knew, nothing at all in common. He knew nothing of her, of her present or of her past. They did not belong to the same world. By no stretching of a drugged imagination could he conceive of them, he and she, forming any lasting partnership. She was a gleam of fire in a dull sky, a brief insanity. She came and went as meteors did. And like the meteor she dazzled. Even had he been free when he had met her, even had they both been free, he could not believe that they would have considered marriage in relation to each other.

As clearly as he saw the problem he had seen the solution of it. Somehow or other, Gwen Lawrence must be transferred from the foreground to the background of his life, and how could that be done more easily than by one of the trips abroad that he would find it so easy to persuade his firm to arrange for him?

They said that love was independent of time and distance. But was it—this sort of love, at any rate? As an officer in France he had censored a great many letters from soldiers to their girls. And he remembered how, practically without exception, the long eight-page protestations that arrived in his dug-out nightly in the early days after a separation, dwindled, month by month, into a two-page bulletin of facts. They might still be thinking of their girls, they might still be loyal to them, they might still even be in love with them, but the acute need of them had gone. They had learnt to do without them. And for him, too, a few weeks and few hundred miles would distil in time that same numbing medicine.

"I must get away," he had told himself. "Get right away, before I am involved beyond recall."

There was a point, always, in every love affair, it was said, when you could extricate yourself from an entanglement. That point once past, you became powerless. And as day after day went by, day after day on which no sight of that pale face set in its helmet of dark hair would trouble him; day after day in which over the line of wire no sound of that deep, many-toned voice would be borne to him, little by little he would come to place her among those things of life that one was destined to have sight of and to lose: she would become, in his imagination, distant and unattainable.

Absence and time would not make him care any the less for her, but they would move her out of the foreground into the background of his life. So that even in the London that she was a part of, the frequent sight of her would be no longer a necessary condition of his

presence there. And again Joan and he could be happy with one another.

That was what he had planned. And then for this to happen.

Dazedly he lurched back towards his room. The irony of life! What words could you find to describe it! That it should come now, this thing for which he had longed so desperately: now when he had no use for it. That at the moment when for the first time practically in his life he had genuinely wanted to escape from England he should be given this appointment that chained him permanently to a London desk: this appointment that would force him to make decisions at a time when he was incapable of deciding anything; when safety could lie for him in flight alone.

Gradually the fog over his mind lifted so that he could see clearly the problem that awaited him. But though he could see the details and situations of the problem, the solution of it still eluded him.

"I shall have to stay in London," he told himself. "In London, where Gwen Lawrence is. And in the mood that is now upon me I shall be unable to resist the temptation of seeing her. In that respect things are as bad as they ever were. But in this respect they are worse, that I can no longer leave indefinite my relationship with Joan. There is nothing now to prevent our marrying. The first thing that she will say when I tell her is, 'Now, of course, we can get married.'"

And yet how was he to marry her, how in fairness to himself or her could they marry, while the spell of this other attraction was still upon him?

"And if I tell her, I shall lose her. And I do not want to tell her because I love her, because I need her, because I know that I shall go on needing and loving her, when the hold of this other fascination has loosened.

"What am I to do," he murmured, "what am I to do?"

. . . . . .

It was only a few moments after Graham Moreton had left Mr. Garlich's office that Christopher Stirling walked into it.

"You'll be thinking me, I'm afraid," he said, "an exasperating nuisance. But I promised to let you know about those shares. I got them at fifty-four."

"Then I don't think, young man, you've done at all badly for yourself."

"I'm very sure I haven't, so sure, in fact, that I've come to talk to you about taking up some preference shares as well."

"In that case——" said Mr. Garlich. And for a quarter of an hour they discussed such practical matters as concern stock and goodwill and undiscounted bills. At the end of the quarter of an hour Christopher lifted his head with a smile from the pile of papers.

"Thank you very much," he said. "It's quite clear now. I've wasted a lot of your time."

Mr. Garlich chuckled.

"Waste my time," he said; "why, that's all there is to do with it when you're as old or, rather, when your figure has made you as unromantic as I am."

Christopher laughed.

"I shouldn't have thought you'd be feeling that. Your business ought to be exciting enough."

The old man shrugged his shoulders.

"Money-making's only exciting when there's something to buy with the money when you've earned it. And by the time you're my age you've bought everything that's for sale."

"But you go on."

"One must pass the time. One has playthings in a nursery, and when one gets back to a second childhood one has to be given playthings again. Only the playthings are different; they aren't kites and clockwork trains; they're the things that were passions once; buying and selling, and the outwitting of a rival. That's all they are now—playthings."

And he sighed, but without sadness, with acceptance simply.

"With that young fellow Moreton, now, how different it all is," he said. "For him there are so many things for sale; I've taken your advice about him, by the way."

"What advice?"

"About giving him that job. I've just told him about it. Scared the lad out of his wits, at first. Told him we shouldn't want him to be going abroad for us any more. He thought he was going to be sacked; the poor devil couldn't say a word when I told him what I really meant."

And while Elias Garlich chuckled to himself over the memory of his joke, the blood through Christopher's veins beat to a gayer rhythm. So Joan was safe now. Graham had got his job. In a month or two they would be married. Gwen Lawrence would have passed out of their lives.

The first thing he did on his return to his studio was to ring up Joan.

"I was just wondering," he said, "what you'd like me to get you for a wedding present."

The laugh from the other end of the line was harsh and a little bitter.

"One's got to get married first," she said.

"But I don't think you'll have to wait so very long."

"And what makes you think that?"

"Oh, nothing. Something I heard to-day."

"Christopher"—there was a catch in her voice and an excited, breathless raising of the tone—"Chris, dear," she said, "what do you mean? Who from, and what?"

But he was not going to let her know of the part, such as it was, that he had played in the hastening of the appointment. He made his reply as off-hand as possible.

"I felt certain you'd have heard," he said. "I

heard someone saying somewhere that Graham'd been given that job in London he'd been waiting for."

"Oh, Chris!"

From the intonation of those two words he could tell how the softly-coloured cheeks had glowed, how the cornflower-blue eyes had been lit with happiness, how over the white and even teeth the lips had parted in a smile. And for a moment over his own heart the muscles slightly tightened.

So young and fresh, she was: so little weaponed for the long conflict that awaited her. "He's a lucky devil," he thought, "that Graham Moreton. I wonder how far he realizes it."

And as he returned to his easels and his canvasses, he couldn't help wondering whether he could justify the part he had been playing in Joan's career. "I've forced on her," he thought, "a risk I wouldn't take myself. But only," he added, "because she is at an age when that risk is worth the running: because she is the only age at which a realization of youth's dreams is possible."

And after all the risk on the other side was greater. He surveyed mentally the panorama of his friends' and acquaintances' emotional experience. How practical they were, how worldly, with how little after all at stake. He thought of Mildred Atkinson and Humphrey: of that brief fusing of an instinct that each in their own way was making use of: of Gwen Lawrence exploiting callously the ignoble ardour of which she was the object: of Madge Gillett and of all that underworld of sordid traffic. Of Sybyl Marchant and Geoffrey Brackenridge. In love with one another though they might be, he would not wish for Joan Faversham a state of mind and spirit when such a courtship would be able to content her.

Sybyl Marchant and Geoffrey Brackenridge.

It was an entertaining enough comedy, of course.

During the past weeks he had been the witness of more than one amusingly significant incident. There

had been the evening when he had called at Geoffrey's flat on the way to the Blankstons' dance.

Geoffrey was alone, which had surprised him rather, and which surprised him more, he was wearing an old tweed coat above a pair of ageing flannel trousers.

"I don't go out often nowadays," he explained.

"A statement," Christopher said, "to which that row of cards along the mantelpiece would seem to give the lie."

Geoffrey had shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, those! I don't know why I've put them there," he said. "I don't suppose I shall go to one of them."

He had expressed surprise.

"I seem to remember your saying once that parties were among the few things that made life tolerable."

"That was in Lille, when we hadn't any."

"Still," he had said, "I'm sure you haven't become so blasé now that you wouldn't have found some of them amusing. This show of Mrs. Retherway's at Claridge's, for example, and you might do worse than take the floor at Walton House."

Geoffrey had shaken his head.

"I am getting too old," he had said.

But that had not been the real reason, as Christopher had realized a few moments later, when a triple knock upon the door had explained his presence in his own flat alone on an evening for which two cards upon the mantelpiece were inviting him to revelry.

"Sybyl," he had exclaimed, and jumped quickly to his feet.

"Oh, but Geoffrey dear, I'm tired. Such a day," he had heard her saying. "What, who do you say? Christopher here? How pleasant. But I'm too exhausted to say a word. Really, my dear, I don't know when I've been so tired. You'll excuse me, won't you, Mr. Stirling?" she had continued, as she

came into the sitting-room. "I'm too absolutely worn out to do more than collapse into an armchair and sleep."

She had not, however, looked particularly exhausted. He had never seen her indeed appear more fresh and radiant. Her eyes were bright; her cheeks flushed, and against the black velvet of her evening cloak the skin of her neck was a cool glow of tinted ivory.

"Such a day," she was saying, "not a moment's pause from nine o'clock. Not one second, I assure you, Geoffrey, not a single second."

"Indeed," he said, "and where has the sum of these fourteen hectic hours been divided?"

He had tried to speak lightly, but it was not an extravagant success. Sybyl took, however, not the least notice of his tone's acidity.

"Where have I been?" she said cheerfully. "Well, let me see now. To begin with I put in three hours pretty solid work at the office. Then Jack called to take me out to lunch."

"Jack? Jack who?"

"Forester, Jack Forester; you don't know him, Geoffrey, I think."

"And after that?"

"After that, well, let me see, oh yes, of course. I met Eric Burge as we were walking back down Piccadilly, and he insisted on taking me to the Rialto Cinema, to the film of the Dempsey fight. Rather terrible, but rather exciting. I really must go and see a fight. I suppose, Geoffrey, you wouldn't care to go to the Goddard show?"

Geoffrey shook his head dubiously.

"Is it worth it, do you think? I saw Beckett and Carpentier years ago. I paid five pounds for my seat and it was over in fifteen seconds. I swore then that nothing would induce me to see another. I don't really think it's worth it; do you mind?"

"Not a bit, my dear," Sybyl had answered. "Of

course not. Eric Burge'll take me. He wanted to fix it up this afternoon, but I thought I'd ask you first. That's quite all right. And then after the film I had to rush back to change. I only just had time to do it. We dined at the Clarion and really, Geoffrey, I assure you, the food there was more appalling than anything you can conceive. The soup was tasteless and the sole colbert greasy, and the bird was dry. I don't know if I'm getting hypercritical, but I find that I simply can't eat food nowadays unless it's absolutely perfect. It's your fault, I suppose, for giving me an educated palate."

But he was not listening. There was a deep furrow between his eyes and the thumb of his left hand was twitching impatiently across bent knuckles.

"When is this fight?" he had asked abruptly.

"What fight?"

"The one you were speaking of."

"The Goddard show? Somewhere in October, I believe. At the Albert Hall."

"Very well," he had said, "I'll take you."

"But I thought, my dear, it wasn't worth it?"

"Oh, I don't know," he answered hurriedly. "Perhaps I went with the wrong crowd the other time. I should like to go with you."

It was a repeat performance word for word almost, of that scene at the cocktail party when he had given up his golf to take her to a matinée; a repeat performance with this difference, that whereas then he had given up a thing he valued for something he valued more—whereas then he had been prefering an afternoon in her company to an afternoon upon the golf links—he was now doing something he did not want to do, something perhaps, he could ill afford to do, because he could not tolerate the idea of her receiving pleasure at the hands of some other man. Where once he had been choosing the better of two goods, he was accepting now the lesser of two ills. And as before at the cocktail party that smile, that dizzying, that intoxicating

smile of gratitude and triumph was cast radiantly about him.

"That is nice of you," she said. "I shall enjoy it ever so much more with you."

It was a scene that must have been repeated many times. Christopher could picture her dropping in at odd moments at Geoffrey's flat on her way to some party or on her way back from some party, an elegant, scented, care-free creature. She would perch herself upon the table, the grey chinchilla cloak flung backwards from her neck and shoulder, the smoke of her cigarette drifting upwards from the pouted mouth to the tip-tilted freckled nose; would perch there sipping at a cocktail, chatting rapidly and inconsequently of this and that, of that and the other thing.

"I'm told, Geoffrey," he could hear her saying, "that there's a fearfully good cabaret show just now at the Piccadilly."

And he could hear the answer.

"Is there? We must go to it then. What about next Friday?"

She would protest, of course, and shake her head.

"Oh no, but really, Geoffrey, I didn't mean that. You mustn't be taking me out the whole time. I don't want you to neglect your other friends. I don't want to be selfish."

"It is I who am selfish," Geoffrey would reply. "If either of us is. I always, you see, want you with me."

And the light in her eyes would soften and she would smile, and, "You're very nice, Geoffrey," she would say. And on such a moment he could picture her jumping from the table, slipping across the floor to stand close to him, her hands placed upon his shoulders, her face lifted to his kiss.

An amusing comedy.

On her own admission Sybyl Marchant was a woman to whom material things were of greater matter than those intangible considerations that are for

certain romantic and reckless temperaments more ponderable. She valued material pleasure because in her eyes that was the only form of pleasure that survived. And Geoffrey, who was not a conceited man, whose experiences with women were slight and inconsiderable, must in the tossing hours of wakeful wretchedness have found it easy to believe that Sybyl cared probably less for him than for the things he stood for: and that he could only keep her by the indulging of her tastes and luxuries. Which was, upon his income, hardly possible.

Not unnaturally he had become fiercely jealous. Christopher had realized that one evening when he had come back to his flat after a theatre.

"You might excuse me for a moment, will you?" he had said. "I want to telephone."

There was a long pause; then the sound of his voice saying: "What, no answer? Thank you very much." There was a frown upon his face when he returned; a worried, impatient, unhappy sort of frown. He talked at random and inconsequently, and broke off in the middle of a sentence.

"Look here, do you mind, please would you excuse me, I must telephone."

But again there had been no answer. His frown when he returned had been the deeplier furrowed. And as half an hour later Christopher walked down the stairs out of his flat he had heard the tinkle of the bell as Geoffrey lifted the receiver. And he had pictured him during the long, slow passing hours, waiting beside the telephone, in a torture of angry jealousy, for the sound that was to herald her return: all those hours waiting there, wondering what she was doing, knowing she was with another man.

"Whom is she going out with all these evenings?" Christopher asked him once.

He shook his head.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't want to know. I should only be jealous if I did."

And that was the man who had once said "*J'en ai soupé!*"

Oh yes, it was amusing enough, when watched impersonally, but it was not a play in which one would want anyone for whom one cared personally to have a part. It was a comedy after all, and the aftermath and disenchantment.

He could not believe that he had acted wrongly in making the way for Joan's marriage smooth.

. . . . . .

With bright eyes and beating heart Joan Faversham sat that evening before the gilt-edged mirror of her dressing-table. Before her was spread the irregular, many-coloured regiment of blue glass jars, green combs and enamelled powder boxes, of whose aid her young beauty stood in such small need. Mechanically she passed over her sleek shingled head a long ivory-handled brush. At last Graham had been given that appointment—that was all that she could think of.

It was curious in a way that he had not rung her up to tell her, but he had known that he would be dining with them that evening, and perhaps he had wished to wait till it was quite certain; till he was able to tell it her himself; tell her as she would have it told to her, in a kiss. In a few minutes now he would be with her. Within a few minutes' time he would have whispered that which for thirty months she had waited so patiently to hear.

In the street below she heard the sound of a car drawing up beside the pavement. Rising from her chair, she pulled the curtain back and peeped. Yes, it was his car all right, how small he seemed as one looked down on him. And yet how long a shadow lay backwards across the steps.

The front door opened, a broad oblong of light was flung across the pavement; the oblong narrowed, a shadow crossed it; it disappeared. He was in the house then now. And it was five minutes still to eight.

He had come early especially, so that they might have a minute or two alone together first.

He shouldn't have that minute, though. She would come down a little late, after her parents, so that it would be impossible for him to tell her before dinner, and for an hour or two hours he would have to sit, the news trembling on his lips, unable to tell her, because such news as that could be told only when they were alone together.

She laughed happily to herself at the picture of Graham fidgeting impatiently with his fork, unable to eat, leaving the food untouched upon his plate, exactly as he had done that evening when he had first kissed her, that interminable evening when she had thought that they would never be alone. She laughed to herself as she smoothed back softly with her forefinger the touch of carmine on her cheeks.

It was five minutes past eight before she reached the drawing-room.

"I believe, Joan," her mother said, "you're getting more unpunctual every day."

"It's she who's got to pay for it," her father laughed. "Her cocktail must be lukewarm by now."

But she was in no mood to worry about a mother's complaint or a spoilt cocktail. With that nervous expression upon Graham's face that she had noticed at the other dramatic stage of their wooing, he was leaning back against the edge of the grand piano, his cocktail glass unemptied at his elbow. And as she noted the worried set of his features, her heart beat with a glad spasm of reassurance: so it was all right, then; he had been given that appointment; for she had not been before, now she came to think of it, quite certain. Christopher might easily have been mistaken. But there could be no mistaking that expression; something definite had happened.

"Hullo, Graham!" she said casually. "Now, I want you to tell me exactly what you thought of the dance."

It was the first time she had seen him since a dance that had been given at a friend's house, a few days before, and which Joan had to some extent helped to supervise, and she broke into an eager fusillade of questions.

"What about the champagne, Graham? Did you think it was too sweet?"

"No, no," he said. "Just right."

"And the quails, did you think they were a little dry?"

"No, no," he said. "Just right."

"I couldn't help feeling that there was too much fizzy lemonade in the claret-cup."

"No, no," he said. "Just right."

"But you say everything's just right." And she laughed happily, knowing how eager at any other time he would have been to discuss the details of the party.

A maid hovered in the doorway.

"Dinner is served, madam," she announced.

Slowly they filed into the dining-room.

"It's only a light dinner, I'm afraid," said Mrs. Faversham.

At any other time Graham would have some courteous reference to the invariably high quality of their cook's efficiency, but on this occasion he contented himself with a sound that was nearer to a grunt than any other vocalized form of articulation.

A pale pink soup in which floated the white-green flesh of turtle was set before him. He drank the soup, Joan noticed, instead of sipping it.

"Tell me, Graham," she asked, "who do you think was the prettiest girl there?"

He looked up, blinked.

"Where?" he answered vaguely.

She laughed.

"At the dance, of course."

Again he blinked.

"Oh yes, of course," he said, and lowered his spoon hurriedly into the soup.

To the original question he made no reply.

His soup plate was removed, another plate set before him. At his elbow a maid offered him a dish of grilled kidneys surrounded by a sage green bed of spinach. There were eight kidneys, and he took three.

With a twinkle in her eyes:

"Whose dress did you like the best?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered, "yes."

Across the table Mr. and Mrs. Faversham exchanged a puzzled glance.

And as Joan looked curiously and intently at her fiancé's bent, flushed face, a sudden and unaccountable dread seized her. There was something more in this strange abstraction than the mere impatience to impart good news.

In silence the course was finished, and a rum omelette flickering with transparent flame was brought on a large silver dish.

"It should be good, this," Mr. Faversham remarked. "A rather special rum."

"Nothing like army rum," was Graham's comment.

And abruptly and with a quick but unanimated and level-toned articulation, he began a rather long and not particularly pertinent description of a night in the line near Ypres, when the three men who had been sent to bring up rations had got stuck in the mud, had had to dump something in a shell hole, and had decided to leave the mail and the bread ration behind them and save the rum, with the result that the section was left with a full rum ration and only a few tins of bully beef between themselves and insobriety.

There was a weak but general laugh, and the omelette was taken away to be replaced by a savoury of bacon and olives and mushrooms.

A heavily oppressed atmosphere overhung the table. With narrowed and unhappy eyes Joan watched

Graham smooth out on his plate the roll of bacon and cut away the fat from it. Then ignore both the lean and the fat portion, sever a section of the toast and mushroom, convey it to his mouth, place his knife and fork on the plate together, and with unlifted eyes toy with the long tapered stem of his wineglass.

Across the table Mr. and Mrs. Faversham made desultory and not too successful attempts at conversation. Something was wrong, they realized, between the young people. Well, it was not for them to interfere.

"You're looking tired, Graham," Mrs. Faversham remarked at last.

"Tired?" he retorted. "Oh no, really, no. I'm perfectly fit."

"You mustn't overwork."

At the mention of the word work he gave a start that Joan did not fail to notice. So something had happened at the office, she told herself; and the dark suspicion came to her that it was not because he was impatient to tell her something, but because he was afraid to tell her something, that he was rude and indifferent and self-absorbed.

In the drawing-room afterwards conversation was no livelier but less difficult. A cross-word puzzle saved them. As long as they could force their attention on some definite object they could ignore Graham's brusque silences and vague replies. Whisky and soda was brought in. Slowly the clock ticked round towards eleven.

At last Graham and Joan were left alone together.

Steadily, in a desperate attempt to read the other's thoughts, they looked into each other's eyes. How much or how little, he asked himself, did she really know? She could not, in point of fact, know anything. But she had surprised him in the past more than once by her prescience of things that she could have learnt only by divination. When she fixed upon him those curious, intent, appraising eyes, he felt that

he did not hold one thing in his life secret from her.

She could not know, for there were no means by which she could have learnt, that this morning the long-looked-for appointment had been granted. And yet there was that in her eyes that disarmed assurance.

"I'm afraid I've been very dull this evening," he said lamely. "I'm rather tired."

As though he had not spoken:

"We're going away, you know," she said, "on Monday."

He nodded his head. It was the knowledge indeed, that by Monday she would be out of England and among the Italian lakes that had decided him to withhold his news from her. She would be away for six or seven weeks. And there was little chance of her learning the news from anybody else. Who, after all, did she know that was in any way connected with his business? He needed so badly a pause to think in.

"Monday," he repeated vaguely, "and to-day's Friday, and this week-end I'll be out of London. It doesn't look, Jonakin——"

She finished the sentence.

"As though we should be meeting before I went. Ah well, but it doesn't matter. There are so many other days."

She continued, for all the pain that was above her heart, to keep her voice bright and cheerful. She did not understand. She did not pretend to understand. She only knew that during the last few weeks a dark cloud had obscured their happiness. She was in a current that was carrying her, she knew not whither.

"I mustn't keep you up," she said. "Mother was right; you are tired, Graham."

He agreed. Yes, he was a little tired.

"Don't overwork," she said.

And there was in her eyes such a smile of indulgent sadness as mothers use when a small child lies to them.

"I suppose," she went on, "things aren't too easy

at the office now." But to that question he could make no response. He mumbled inaudibly, hesitated for a moment, then turned beside her towards the door. There was a constraint between them such as they had never known before.

In the porch, through the half-light, for a moment they looked each other in the eyes. And on the lips of each of them a question trembled; a question that they dared not utter; dared not utter for fear that it might end in explanations that would involve the loss permanently of one another; the loss that they could not face.

For a moment they stood looking at one another. Then suddenly, clumsily, and with no word said, he snatched her close into his arms, kissing her with a desperation in which fear and need were mingled. Then as suddenly and as clumsily, and with no word said, he released her and, turning, he ran down the steps of the house towards the car.

Motionless, her arms still aching from his fingers' pressure, her lips tingling from his kiss, she stood there, watching him.

"He still loves me," she told herself. "Whatever may have happened, whatever may be going to happen, with the half at least of himself, he's still in love with me."

CHAPTER XVIII

A LAST ATTEMPT

GUY FORTESCUE was growing restive. Gwen Lawrence, who had passed through such crises before, could recognize the symptoms. He was becoming jealous and suspicious and proprietary, nor was he being quite so lavish with presents as he once had been. He was reaching, in fact, the point when ultimatums get delivered.

It was an awkward and not particularly profitable period, and Gwen was wondering whether she might not be well advised to hasten on the moment of departure. It was what she had done in the case of Holdenstein, but then there had been Guy Fortescue to fall back upon. And at the present moment she could not see anyone who was ready to assume that privileged position. There were a number of people who took her out to dances and to dinners two or three times a month, and sent her occasional gifts of gloves and stockings. But she did not see who was to provide her, when Guy went, with the more substantial testimonies of masculine devotion.

And that he was going there could be no doubt. It was annoying, but there it was. She had not expected it to come anything like so soon. For eighteen months at the least she had meant to keep him dangling.

She had managed longer than that with Holdenstein, in days when her technique had been far less assured.

It was not, therefore, without alarm that on a certain late August afternoon she sat examining her reflection in the mirror. Were her looks proving a waning asset? It was so hard to tell, when you spent a great many hours every day before a glass. You got so used to yourself that you could scarcely be expected to notice any change. It was frightening to lose in seven months a man you had meant to keep for twenty.

She recalled, dismally, the incidents of the scene that had occasioned this series of reflections.

They had lunched at Boulestin's together. She had been tired and her head was aching, and she had left him to entertain her, with the result that the greater part of the meal had been spent in silence.

"You can drive me back, Guy, if you like," she had remarked afterwards, and though he had said to his chauffeur without comment, "17 Ciber Crescent," she could see that he had meant to let her take a tube or taxi.

This was not the first time that had happened, and a feeling of fear, and in a way also of guilt, surprised her. For if your company is the only reward you give to a man it is prudent to make that company amusing.

"You'll come in, won't you?" she said, as the car drew up outside her flat.

He hesitated.

"I really ought——" he began, but she interrupted him.

"Please," she said, and in her eyes was that look so sparingly employed, which never failed to draw him back to her: that look which seemed to say: "Ah, but, however wayward I may be, I do, I really do care for you, and had things only been different——"

"All right," he said, "for a little while."

It was unfortunate that there should have happened to be lying open on the table the account for forty-seven pounds that she had received that morning from her hairdresser's. It was the last moment she would have

chosen for showing him a bill. As it was, not unnaturally, he picked it up.

"Good heavens!" he said. "Forty-seven pounds. You must spend a lot of time at this hairdresser's of yours!"

"That," she smiled, "would have, I should have hoped, been obvious."

But he did not answer her smile, nor did he, as he had on so many previous occasions, pocket the bills with some such remark as, "Oh well, I suppose I had better look after it." He had merely tossed the account back upon the table.

"You're ridiculously extravagant," he said.

And it would be, of course, at such a moment that Graham should choose to ring up with the request that he might come round and talk to her that evening.

She was not, indeed, too certain that in Graham was not to be found the secret cause of all her troubles. Guy's exasperation was far more likely to be due to the lack of interest she had taken in his management than to any loss of attraction in herself. A man might fall in love with you for your looks, but the loss or retention of your looks had very little to do with the loss or retention of his love. It was far more likely to be because she had not bothered sufficiently about him that he was beginning to consider the attraction of her company alone an insufficient return for a certainly considerable outlay of time and capital.

And it was only since Graham had come into her life that she had ceased to bother, because his presence there had made so wearisome for her the game that she had set herself to play. And it was because of Graham that she had not set herself to find with the necessary assiduity the second string which was to take Guy's place. It was Graham who had disorganized her life by occupying too much of her thoughts, and by shaking her faith in the worth of the life that she was leading. Whatever your mode of

life might be, you could only carry it on successfully when you could fling conviction into it.

In the old days, when she had felt herself to be taking her revenge for her husband's treachery, in her exploitation of other men, she had been confident enough in the virtue of her campaign. But through Graham she had come to see that there were things in life of genuine worth that she was missing. Graham had undermined her faith. Graham was the cause of the alarming position in which she found herself. Graham had precipitated her quarrel with Guy.

"That man again," Guy had remarked angrily. "You seem to spend your whole time with him nowadays. He calls for you at Ciro's in his car. He takes cocktails with you every evening. He's young, of course, and I'm old. I'm not surprised; it's the way of things, the way of nature; I don't complain. You've had your choice and made it. I know when to stand aside."

She had made no attempt to answer him. She was not going to demean herself by squabbling. She waited quietly till he had finished. Then:

"You've said quite enough, Guy, and what you have said is quite unworthy of you. But we'll not discuss it now. I'm going out this afternoon, and I am going to change my frock."

And without another word she had turned and walked out of the room into her bedroom. After a pause of a few minutes she had heard the heavy sound of Guy's feet in the passage, and the bang of the front door.

"In half an hour's time," she thought, "he'll be ringing up to apologize. Or else there'll be a special messenger with a crate of flowers. And next time we meet he'll be pitifully abject."

But it would, she knew too well, only be a delaying of an inevitable conclusion. She was familiar enough with the geography of the road that she was travelling. With such men as Fortescue one

had two quarrels. There was the first one, when he discovered that you were not the type of woman for which he had taken you, when to keep him you had to appeal to his sense of chivalry, his better nature. And the second quarrel, when the fabric of that second nature had begun to wear, when he had begun to feel that he could make a compromise with less exacting duties. When that second quarrel began there was nothing to be done but to let him go. His patience was exhausted. The game was finished.

In a day or two or a week or two, in a month or two even it might be, if she were very clever, that break would come. It behoved her to look round for some other man who would pay her rent and bills, and give her presents that could be converted subsequently into honest cash. It was time she started looking round.

But she was too tired at the moment, too sated with the personal ignominy of her calling. In a couple of hours Graham would be with her. That was all that mattered at the moment.

Since that afternoon at Friday Street she had not seen him. But for scarcely an hour on end had he been absent from her thoughts. It was absurd of her and she knew it. This impractical infatuation could lead to nothing. It was filling her life with irksome and useless complications. There was nothing but wretchedness in it for him as well as for her. It would be a good thing for both of them when he was married.

In the meantime, however, while he was in the foreground of her life, it was impossible for her to consider against what background it was that she must arrange for him to move.

In what temper, she wondered, would he come to her? Pleading or apologetic? Would he come with words of passion or excuse? Would he be practical with suggestions for the ordering of their future, or would he be head-strong and self-willed?

And in what spirit was she to respond to him? She who had sworn never to complicate her life again with love of any man.

The moment would decide for her, she supposed. It depended on the spirit in which he came to her. For Gwen Lawrence was one of those women who can love only where they are loved. Or, rather, where they feel that they can be loved worthily. She had her pride, which would not allow her to fling herself away on a man who was unworthy of her. Fretfully, impatiently, she waited.

. . . . . .

At last he came, an embarrassed, a wild-eyed figure at which she looked curiously, wonderingly: it was a Graham that she had not seen before; such a Graham as Joan Faversham had once seen dusty and soiled and travel-stained; a desperate and haunted creature, conscious of nothing but the need for flight.

In the centre of the room he shifted from one foot to another, while the fingers of his left hand fluttered nervously at the knot of his silk tie, and his right hand in his pocket rattled a few odd coins.

"It's about the shares," he blurted out. "Have you noticed that they're down to eighty-two?"

It was the last thing of which she had expected him to speak. That excuse for conversation had been surely long ago dispensed with.

"My dear Graham," she laughed, "you can't think how tired of those shares I am. I thought they were going to be so romantic; I had pictured myself either a bankrupt or a millionairess. Instead of that there's been the dull middle road of mediocrity, a hovering between eighty-one and eighty-five, and no excitement. I feel myself to have been considerably misused."

There was no answering laugh in Graham's eyes.

"It's serious," he said. "I'm frightened. I'm afraid they're going down. I told you that there might be a real crash any time."

"Why, has your broker warned you?"

He was about to nod his head, but his old inability to lie to her prevented him.

"No," he said. "No, he hasn't said anything to me."

"Then till he does, Graham dear, let's leave the matter as it is. For I can assure you that for a long time now I've ceased to take any interest in the shares at all. Let's talk of something else."

But he still hesitated from one foot to the other, and still at the knot of his tie his fingers fidgeted, and still in his pocket the coins were rattled one against the other.

"I assure you," he said, "I do really beg you——"

"Please, my dear, please."

Had she cared less for him, she would have been annoyed. And even as it was she was more than a bit impatient. She had had a trying day, for whose difficulties indirectly Graham was responsible. He owed it to her to make himself agreeable now.

But the worried, unhappy expression was not to be banished from his face.

"They're going down," he persisted. "I know they're going down. Do, please, let me persuade you to sell the things."

"Oh, Graham, Graham," she protested wearily. "You can't think how utterly this subject bores me."

For a moment there was silence. He was looking on the ground now, and the fingers at his tie were still. When he spoke his voice was no longer high-pitched and agitated.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "You see," there was a pause; then, "I did what I thought was best. I've sold those shares."

"What?"

"They were made out in my name. I felt certain they were going down. To protect you I sold them."

"Without my permission?"

He nodded his head.

"And at what price?" she asked him.

"Eighty-two and a fifth."

By a hurried process of mental arithmetic she decided that the transaction had cost her close upon a hundred pounds. It was really too ridiculous. He should never have sold the shares, her shares, without asking her. He could not conceivably have chosen a worse time. He was not to know, of course, that Guy Fortescue had made himself responsible for her losses, nor that the sale had come at a time when it would be imprudent to remind Guy of his debt. But it was really an infernal nuisance. She would have to sell something or other to pay for them. And at a time when she might stand in need of capital. That, of course, Graham could scarcely be blamed for not knowing. But he had had no right without warning her to sell her property. She was not going to make a fuss, however.

"Well, thank goodness," she said, "that I bought my other Florida Asiatics through a less easily influenced medium."

It was his turn to be surprised.

"What!" he exclaimed. "You've got others? You never told me that!"

"The arrangement of my finances is my own concern."

"Of course, of course—only——" He hesitated. "Have you put much in?" he asked.

"Practically all I've got," she answered negligently.

"I see."

Again there was a pause—a pause on his side of embarrassment, on hers of irritation. It was so different, this, from the meeting she had anticipated.

"Well, as you've sold them," she said, "you've sold them. The thing's done and there's no more to be said about it. I'm surprised, I must say, that you should have sold them without telling me. But there it is, and in the meantime how much do I owe you?"

"Owe me? How do you mean?"

In his eyes now there was a blank astonishment.

"The deficit, of course," she replied impatiently. "Between the price at which we bought the shares, and at which we sold them. I've only worked it out roughly in my head, but it seems to me to be about a hundred pounds. I expect you've brought the exact figures with you. How much is it?"

He shook his head.

"You don't owe me anything," he said.

"Oh, come now, come, we bought at eighty-four——"

But he lifted a hand to stay her.

"Surely you don't imagine," he said, "that without asking your permission I should have involved you in a loss of something like a hundred pounds?"

"I was surprised, I will admit. But it's what you have done, isn't it?"

He laughed.

"The shares were made out in my name," he said. "It was on my recommendation that you bought them. I took the responsibility for the purchase. I take the responsibility for the sale."

"Then you mean to say," she paused and looked searchingly, uncomprehendingly at him. "You mean to say," she went on, "that, although you are going to be married in a few weeks, although you have, you must have, a considerable number of obligations imminent, you allowed yourself to lose a hundred pounds, because—because why? Why did you do it, Graham?"

He averted his gaze from her.

"I thought the shares were going down; it seemed better to sell out now than later. I knew you wouldn't agree with me. Naturally I couldn't expect you to shoulder the responsibility of a loss you were not ready to incur. So I took it on myself."

She watched him narrowly.

"That isn't true, Graham," she said quietly.

"What isn't true?"

"What you've just told me. You didn't sell those shares because you were afraid of their going down. You didn't sell them because you wanted to save me money. That's camouflage. And shall I tell you why you sold them? You sold them because you were afraid of me."

The words were spoken quietly, but with a savage intensity that startled him.

"No, no," he stammered; "you're quite wrong. They're going down. I'm—I'm sure they are."

"You don't know. How can you know? Your broker even doesn't know. You were frightened of seeing me. You knew that as long as I held those shares, you could not help seeing me. And so, in order to save yourself, you sold them. So that there shall be no excuse any longer for our meeting. That's why you sold them, Graham Moreton."

He stammered a denial.

"No, no, really no."

She would not listen.

"You were frightened. You didn't dare face the responsibility of your behaviour. You ran away. You're a coward and I've no use for cowards. That's all there is to it."

And turning away from him towards the mantelpiece she lifted the lid of a painted wooden box, took from it a cigarette, and tapped the tip slowly against the nail of her forefinger.

"There's no more to be said, Graham," she repeated quietly, "that's all."

Her back was turned on him. He could not see the expression of her face; how tender her eyes were nor how sad.

He heard only the intonation of the voice that she had steeled deliberately in self-protection. There was no more to be said. She was right. The last word between them had been uttered.

But still he hesitated.

"Well," she said, "what are you waiting for?"

One last look he cast about the room: the room in which so much drama had been enacted for him: the room in which had flowered the strongest emotion that he might ever chance to meet. It was over and he would never be seeing her again. It was what he had wished. It was for this reason that he had sold the shares, and yet now that the point of parting had been reached——

"Good-bye, Gwen," he said, and there was a tremble in his voice; a tremble that hurt her so much that she was forced to dig the nails of her fingers into her hand to prevent herself from turning round and flinging herself into his arms. If in that moment they had looked each other in the eyes, there is no power that would have withheld them from one another. But her face was turned from him, and the firm line of her shoulder was unshaken by any sob.

For a moment he looked at her, then quickly moved away and behind him, as a few hours earlier behind Guy Fortescue, the front door banged heavily. Even as it closed the bell of the telephone began to ring.

"That's Guy," she thought, "ringing up to apologize," but she took no step towards the instrument.

Her head buried in her arm, Gwen Lawrence lay forward, a huddled heap along the mantelpiece, while in the box above the door the bell of the telephone rang itself to silence.

PART III

CHAPTER XIX

J'EN AI SOUPÉ

"IT'S charming, Mr. Stirling, but then all your portraits are."

"It's delightful of you to like it, Lady Heresy, but if you only knew what a relief it is to have a subject that, how shall I put it? is charming of itself without having to be made so."

"I expect that is what you say to all your sitters."

But she was smiling none the less as Christopher Stirling accompanied her to the car.

With a contented smile he walked back into the studio. A pleased client was even more gratifying than the cheque which would be the symbol of her satisfaction. She would say the right things about him; the things that would bring more commissions. And it was not, after all, too bad a picture.

For a moment he appraised it critically. He knew well enough what its fate would be. He had been at the game too long to expect surprises. It would be hung in the autumn exhibition of the Allied Independents, and would be referred to in the daily illustrated papers as "a further distinguished example of a distinguished art." In the sixpenny weeklies it would either be ignored or serve as a peg for some bright debutant of letters to hang his analysis of popularity in art. He had read so many of those articles, and he knew the lines that this particular one would follow. "There must have been painted during

the last twelve months," the article would run, "at least forty portraits by other artists, neither worse nor better than Mr. Stirling's. Why is it that fortune should have placed on his forehead rather than on that of any other of these forty painters the laurels of popular approval?"

And up to a point of course the argument would be sound. He was critic enough to realize that there were living, if not forty, at least a considerable number of painters who could have produced as good a portrait of Lady Heresy as he had, and for a tenth of his price. But the point that the critics consistently forgot was that he had produced in the past work of a sufficiently effective nature to lift him out of the rut of merely talented composition. It was true that much really good work was overlooked, but it was equally true that in no walk of life could success be achieved without a foundation of positive and effective work. He was able to sell now work that was no more than competent because he had produced pictures that were something more: a thing that the odd forty never had.

He walked across to the corner of the studio, and drew back the strip of blue brocade that covered the picture with which he had made his name. There it stood as vivid and as vital as when he had painted it twenty years before.

"They couldn't have done that," he thought, "not many of them." And a slow reassuring smile flickered across his mouth. "I've done it once and I'll be able to do it again," he said, "when something happens that makes me really care. All this," and he pointed a little scornfully towards the portrait of Lady Heresy, "is only a keeping of one's hand in."

It was consequently in no bad humour that he drove some twenty minutes later along the Embankment to the lunch that he had ordered at Sherry's for Geoffrey Brackenridge and himself.

The lunch proved as admirable as Christopher had

anticipated, and it was well after three before they walked out into the rich September sunlight.

"And now?" asked Christopher.

"Anything but work," said Geoffrey. "I've got a quite drinkable bottle of port back at my flat."

"Like the old days at Lille," laughed Christopher, "drinking away an afternoon."

"And is there any better way?"

They never, however, had a chance of putting this contention to the test. They returned to find Sybyl awaiting them in the larger of the two armchairs, a huddled, dismal figure. She was not reading; she was not smoking; her hat was pulled forward over her eyes. Her arms were flung sideways along the chair, and from her wrist dangled, a symbol of dejection on its chain of tortoiseshell, a black silk moiré bag. She did not rise to welcome them. Her head, as they came into the room, was turned listlessly in their direction.

"What, not alone?" she said.

"It's only Christopher."

"I can see quite well who it is. I'm not blind," she snapped.

"Should I go?" asked Christopher.

"Oh, no," she said. "You might as well stay now that you're here. Geoffrey would be sure to tell you. You might as well know now as later."

Her voice was dead, toneless and colourless, and her head was once more bent forward, so that only the white extremity of her chin could be seen beneath the low drawn rimming of her hat.

Indecisively Geoffrey hovered on the rug in front of her.

"What is it, Sybyl?" he began. "Not bad news I——?"

Savagely and abruptly her reply was flung at him.

"Bad news? Oh no, not bad news, when the whole of one's business, the business one's spent six years building up, one's business along with all the

capital one's put into it—oh, not bad news when one finds that one's lost the whole of it within three hours. Not bad news!" And she laughed in a high-pitched, hysterical, disdainful laugh. "Bad news," she continued, "oh, not bad news: at least, I don't know what it may be to you, though as you've been telling me for the last six months that my good's your good, I am justified in assuming, I suppose, that my bad's your bad as well." And again there came that irritated high-pitched laugh. Christopher felt slightly uncomfortable, as one does in a theatre, when an actress exaggerates her part.

"Your business? But what business?" This from Geoffrey. "Your typewriting agency?"

"What other business is it likely to be?" And she shook her arm impatiently so that the tortoiseshell chain of her bag was rattled. "And for heaven's sake, Geoffrey," she added, "don't stand stupidly like that. Do sit down. I can't talk to you up there."

Her voice was quick and coloured now, and angry. But her head was still bent forward, and with a sudden jerk of the hand her hat was pulled the farther downwards upon her eyes.

Anxiously Geoffrey tip-toed across the rug to the other chair, arranged himself upon the extreme edge of it, and leant forward, his hands clasped upon his knees.

"I don't understand," he said timidly, apologetically.

"And what, Geoffrey," this with extreme bitterness, "eludes your comprehension?"

"Everything. What has happened to your business?"

It was what Christopher, too, was anxious to discover. He could not understand how so seemingly capable a woman as Sybyl Marchant should have come so unexpectedly to disaster.

"I thought everything was going so well," Geoffrey added.

" So did I."

" Then how——? "

But she did not let him finish.

" Why must you worry me with all this? I'm tired of explanations. For the last fifteen hours there's been nothing else. It was my manager, if you must know. She had passed bad debts and mortgaged future profits, and she'd got overdrafts from the bank on unsound securities. There's nothing left of the business now, but debts and the goodwill, for whatever that may be worth. I may get someone to take it over. Otherwise it'll be Carey Street, I suppose," and she laughed wearily, mirthlessly.

" I see," he said.

It was a great deal more than Christopher did. His knowledge of the interior economy of typing agencies, or, indeed, of any business house, was by no means great. But he had on occasions interviewed bank managers, and he had found them in his days of struggle irritatingly reluctant to allow overdrafts or accept promissory notes. Neither could he see what future profits there might be in a typing agency to mortgage, nor how a manager could come to mortgage them. He was also mystified by this proposed purchase of goodwill.

Geoffrey, however, was too concerned with the facts of the disaster to be troubled by its machinery.

" What's going to happen now? " he asked.

From the depths of the armchair she shrugged her shoulders.

" How should I know? I've hardly begun to think of it yet," she said. " I could get a job as a secretary, perhaps. If it comes to the worst, I could always, I imagine, get taken on by the people who'll be buying up my business. A clerk in my own office," and the little laugh from the tented shadow of the black cloche hat was proudly, courageously, ironical.

" As long as I'm here," said Geoffrey quickly, " that shan't happen."

"And how, Geoffrey, are you proposing to prevent it?"

"As long as I've a penny in the world."

"So I'm to be dependent on you rather than on a company or an employer?"

"Isn't that what you'd prefer; to be dependent on somebody who cared for you?"

"Which is what every kept woman has had said to her at one time or another. I'm not going to be bought."

"Sybyl!"

"Well! what else is it?"

"When two people love each other."

"When two people live together without marriage, and when the woman is supported by the man, that woman is a kept woman, and I am not going to be that."

"But, surely," he expostulated, "there's all the difference in the world——"

She would not listen to him.

"Oh, be quiet, Geoffrey, be quiet. Can't you leave me alone? Can't you see how worried by it all I am?" Her eyes were blazing, her cheeks were flushed, the words were half shrieked at him. "It's not fair," she said. "It isn't fair!" and turning on to her elbow she burst suddenly and hysterically into tears.

In an instant Geoffrey was by her side. His arm was about her shoulders, his lips against her ear.

"My dear, my darling," he was murmuring. "Don't misjudge me. Please, I beg you, don't misjudge me. Forgive me for having offended you. You know, surely, you must know, that I could respect no one as I respect—as I have respected you. You are everything to me; and surely, when two people mean that to one another, it is their privilege to help each other. I couldn't face the thought of you accepting such menial, such unworthy duties. I beg, I implore you not to. I'm not insulting you by making this offer

to you. I am begging you out of your generosity to accept it. I'm asking you to trust me, to trust me not to allow this to make the least difference to us. Won't you, Sybyl, won't you? "

Slowly the violence of her sobs diminished; slowly subsided to an even breathing. Christopher smiled quietly to himself. He knew so well how it was all to end, if not on this day, then on the other day. He would implore her and entreat. She would retire and resist: resist until finally the acceptance of his offer should have come to be regarded by them both as an added and supreme example of her loyalty and generosity and trust; till, by accepting the unconditional transference to her account of some seven hundred pounds a year, she would seem to have conferred on him the greatest favour that any woman could grant to any man.

There would be no need for her to ask. That had been from the beginning the secret of her hold on him. She had never asked for anything. She had granted favours, not accepted them. She had never asked him to give up golf for her, never asked him to take her to the prize fight; never asked him to spend his money; never asked him to take a flat for her. She had allowed him generously to do things for her, since it pleased him to. Whereas most women dig a pit for a man to fall into, Sybyl Marchant had let Geoffrey dig his own pit for himself. And into that pit he had flung, one by one, the interests and enthusiasms with which her charms had had in the beginning to compete. His friends, his games, his social life, his money, his independence. One by one she had taken the threads of his life between her fingers.

" Please, please, forgive me," he was saying.

The small black-hatted head was lifted from his shoulder. For a moment her eyes looked piercingly and questioningly into his: then twice quickly her head was nodded.

" Very well, Geoffrey," she said, " I forgive you.

We won't talk about it any more. Now, please let me get up and rearrange my face." And, jumping up from the chair, she walked across the room towards the mirror, took from her bag a lip-stick and a powder-puff, and proceeded to repair the ravages of tears.

Christopher waited till the picture was completed, then in a bored, languid voice:

"But still," he said, "I don't quite see how it's happened."

They turned round on him as though he was an intruder on their privacy. And indeed, for the last quarter of an hour they had not realized that they were not alone.

"What do you mean?" said Geoffrey hastily. "How what's happened?"

"How Sybyl's business has got into this condition."

"Hasn't she just explained?"

"Perhaps, but I still don't understand."

"You wouldn't," she interrupted. "You're a painter. Painters don't know anything about business."

That slightly nettled him.

"Still," he said, "I once had an overdraft. It wasn't an easy job, and I don't know how your manager contrived to collect one on unsound securities."

She turned wearily and appealingly to Geoffrey.

"Is this absolutely necessary?" she asked.

Geoffrey was a worthy champion.

"Of course it isn't. I won't have you worried. Be quiet, can't you?" This last to Christopher.

"It's as you like," he said. "But it's just possible that Sybyl's business is not in quite such a bad condition as she thinks, and that the three of us might be able to find some less drastic method than bankruptcy of re-establishing it. There are certainly several things about the affair that I don't begin to understand. But it's as you like, of course. It's not my affair!"

It was a challenge that in the circumstances she could scarcely have let pass.

"Well, and what don't you understand?" she said.

"In the first place, on what kind of securities was this overdraft arranged?"

"On the office furniture and fittings, which were not mine to mortgage."

"A singularly unsuspecting bank. And what were the future profits that were mortgaged?"

"The profits on such work as we had on hand, and had been promised."

"Which would amount to?"

"A fair lot."

"And to whom," Christopher persisted, "were these profits mortgaged?"

But she would not listen further. She had turned quickly on her heel to Geoffrey.

"I won't stand it," she said. "It isn't fair. I've had a great deal to put up with lately. I will not be subjected to this inquisition."

"And you shan't, either," Geoffrey asserted.

But Christopher was resolved to finish what he had to say.

"Very well," he said. "It's not my business what you do or what you have done. But I repeat that I don't begin to understand this bankruptcy. I don't see how the overdraft was obtained. I don't see how these future profits managed to get mortgaged. And, particularly, I don't see how, if your goodwill is the only asset that you have got to set against your debts, you are going to persuade some other firm to take you over. If it is worth the interest of some other business to buy you up, it would be worth Geoffrey's while to put capital into your business, and go on running it. That's all," he said.

Then, as he had expected, the outburst of fury came. Twice, violently, the small grey suède shoe was stamped upon the thick pile carpet.

"It's not fair," she cried. "I won't stand it. I

won't. I came here, Geoffrey, worried and unhappy, in search of sympathy, and first of all you insult me by trying to turn me into a kept woman, and now your friend cross-examines me as though I were a thief. I won't. I won't——"

And for the second time that afternoon she released the torrent of her tears. In a moment Geoffrey was at her side: protectingly his arm was cast about her.

"Darling, darling," he said, "you shan't," and over her shoulder he cast upon Christopher a look of the most bitter and acute vindictiveness.

There was only one thing for Christopher to do.

He did it.

"*J'en ai soüpé*," he murmured ironically to himself as he walked down the stairway of the flat.

CHAPTER XX

A RE-OPENED CHAPTER

"STILL no reply, sir, I'm afraid."

Thoughtfully Humphrey Stirling replaced the receiver of the telephone. It was curious, distinctly. It was the second time that morning that he had been unable to get an answer from Mildred's flat, and he had made three attempts on the previous evening. That, of course, was understandable. But now, between half-past nine and ten. . . .

The line might, of course, be out of order. It was the obvious explanation. At the same time it was idle to deny there had been during the last few weeks more than one disturbing incident; a number of chronological discrepancies; an increase in the weekly bills, and the unheralded arrival one afternoon of that gawkish and uncouth creature with a Cockney accent that she had called "Henry." He realized, of course, had realized all along, that she must have a background somewhere of obscure acquaintances: but there had been something definitely disquieting in Henry's dog-eared silences.

Still, why go into it? There were certain puddles better left unplumbed. He had scarcely flattered himself that Mildred had ever been more than casually in love with him. And if she were to be unfaithful he supposed that his vanity would be less hurt by a Henry than by someone out of his own crowd. It was to the Henry world, after all, that she belonged. Her return

there would not be a criticism of himself. And anyhow, why go into it? Since she gave him what he had asked of her, interest and relaxation. If one hadn't at his age acquired a tempered irony one was better out of things. In the meantime there was money to be earned.

He lifted the receiver of the telephone. "You can get me," he imformed his secretary, "Mr. Graham Moreton."

The voice that answered him was not as impatient as voices are apt to be when their possessors are disturbed before the dictation of the morning's mail is finished. For indeed Graham was at that moment beyond impatience. He was buried too deeply in perplexity. That morning he had received a letter from Joan Faversham.

"GRAHAM DEAR" (it had run), "By Thursday I'll be back in London. I've had a jolly time, but I can't say how much I'm longing to be home. You'll guess the reason. Letters are a poor substitute. My love, dear, all of it, as always."

Thursday. And to-day was Wednesday.

In thirty-six hours' time she would be back in London. Was he glad or sorry? And what was it that he was to say to her?

He was so tired: so unfitted to bear the strain of that first meeting. She would look at him quietly, firmly, and before a word had passed between them he would know that there was not a thing in his life held secret from her. She would know, without his telling her, through what manner of tempest he had passed in her absence. In thirty-six hours' time! To-morrow evening. And he was so tired, physically and emotionally. With his body and his brain.

There was not a particularly large post waiting for him at the office. Some fifteen to twenty letters. And he began lazily, as one who has many half-filled hours

in front of him, to cut back the flaps of the long, slim envelopes.

"I'll be able to take two hours over lunch to-day," he thought.

When the telephone bell rang, he had lifted the receiver without enthusiasm and without annoyance.

"Hullo!" he said. "This is Graham Moreton."

From the other end of the wire a bored and languid voice replied:

"Good morning, Graham, this is Humphrey Stirling. I just wondered whether your friend was anxious for another flutter."

"Not just yet," Graham answered. "That last one was a little too expensive."

"Was it? Not very. And there's a really pretty decent thing—the Connowaya Mines—which he ought to be able to get back his losses on."

"Thanks awfully, but——"

"Frightened? Ah, well; it's not surprising. Folk think they're going to become millionaires in an evening, and when they lose ninety pounds in seven weeks imagine they're being swindled. These amateurs! It was lucky, though, you sold out when you did."

"What, those Florida Asiatics? Why?"

"Haven't you seen?"

"I've hardly looked at a paper for three days."

"And folk tell me I'm incurious! Why, whenever I sell shares I spend the next two years working out what I've lost by being uncourageous, while you can't be bothered to look for seven weeks. You'd have felt ever so much more cheerful if you had."

"Are they going down?"

"Going? They're gone. They were at seventy last night, and heavens know where they'll be by lunch time. Not far off fifty, I expect."

Fifty! And with Gwen Lawrence still holding on to those shares of hers!

"But—but—what are we to do?" he stammered.

"Do? What do you mean, do? What is there for us to do?"

"I know," Graham answered helplessly, "that's just the point, what is there for us to do?"

"Exactly," was Humphrey's comment. "Though what particular reason there is for our wanting to do anything——" And he paused on a note of interrogation.

"You don't understand."

"At present, no."

There was a pause. Then:

"Oh well, I suppose it's all right," said Graham wretchedly, and hung up the receiver on its clamp.

Humphrey Stirling shrugged his shoulders.

"Quaint," he murmured, "quaint, admittedly. I imagined that news like that would make him dance round the office with delight. He'd have gone potty if he had learnt he had made two thousand in a night, but because he has learnt that he hasn't lost two thousand, which is the same thing in the long run, for he's two thousand pounds better off at this moment than he has any right to expect to be, he begins to moan and groan and wonder what's to be done about it. Quaint, extremely quaint. I'd like to know. But——" and again resignedly he shrugged his shoulders, "but I shan't," he added, "so why go into it?"

And, lifting the receiver of the telephone, he proceeded to get into touch with a client who might be prepared to take advantage of the imminent prosperity of the Connowaya Mines.

With listless, downcast head, Graham Moreton leant forward across his desk. Down to seventy and falling, and with Gwen Lawrence holding heaven knew how many of them. "Oh, practically all I've got," she had said jokingly. Which might mean anything; which might be a grotesque exaggeration or a laughing confession of the truth. How was he to

know? She was the sort of woman who would plunge recklessly. And if she had taken as her limit eighty-three or eighty she might well find herself faced with a deficit that only the sale of everything she possessed could meet.

Seventy and falling fast! And it had been through him, on his recommendation, that she had bought these shares: it would be through himself of all people in the world that she had been ruined! Unless, that was to say, she had had from her other broker the warning to sell out in time? That at least he could find out. "Give me the exchange," he told the operator, and as his heart thudded against his shirt he repeated the number that he had sworn never under any circumstances to repeat again.

There was a long pause before the reply came, and it was then a Cockney and unfamiliar voice that answered him.

"May I speak, please, to Mrs. Lawrence?"

"Mrs. Lawrence is away," he was informed.

"Away? Where?"

"Where? I don't know. She didn't leave no address. 'No letters to be forwarded,' she said. I was to clean out the flat, she said, then go. Leave the keys, she told me, with the agent."

"But did she sell her shares out first?"

"Shares—what shares?"

"The Florida Asiatics, of course."

"Don't know," the voice grumbled surlily, "what you're talking about at all."

"But her broker," he exclaimed. "Who's her broker? What's his address?"

"Now how can I tell? I'm a char——"

Desperately Graham drew the back of his hand across his forehead. The shares falling, Gwen away, and this ignorant fool at the other end.

"And you've no idea," he persisted, "where Mrs. Lawrence has gone?"

"'Aven't I told you once she didn't leave no

address? I was to tidy up the flat, she said, this morning——"

Eagerly he caught her up.

"Then it's to-day she went away?"

"That's what I've been telling you."

To-day. Then she could not be too impossibly far away. He looked quickly at his watch; a quarter-past ten. Two hours ago she had been in London. Somewhere she must be in England still.

"You don't remember," he asked, "if she said anything about her journey, anything that might give you any idea of where she was making for?"

There was a pause, a pause that could not have lasted longer than twenty seconds, but that to Graham waiting impatiently at the other end appeared unending.

"Oh, please, please," he began.

"No, now, don't fluster me. I'm trying to think. What did she say now? Something about having booked a suite somewhere at a hotel; something about being afraid it would be a wretched crossing."

"A wretched crossing," he repeated the words excitedly. That was a clue at least. A wretched crossing. There were only a limited number of places to which she could be going. Ostend or Calais or Boulogne. "And when did she leave the flat?" he asked.

"About half-past eight."

With hurried fluttering fingers he turned the pages of an A B C. There was the 9.10 to Folkestone, and the 9.15 to Dover. Ostend or Calais then. To Brussels or to Paris.

There was nothing more that this woman had to tell him. He knew enough. Either she would be reaching Paris at half-past four, or Brussels at a little after five. She had booked a suite at a hotel. Wherever she was bound eventually, it would seem tolerably certain that she had decided to break her journey for the night at one or the other capital. And there, either to Paris or to Brussels the news

must be somehow got to her; must be got to her before she had passed beyond hope of finding into the vast pleasure ground of Europe.

And there was only one way in which it could be got to her. Telegrams and telephones would be unavailing. There was one way only. He would have to take the news himself. Paris at half-past four or Brussels at a little after five, and with no possible way of getting to Brussels before she did. The Imperial Airways line had been temporarily suspended. He would stand no chance of finding her were he to arrive after her. She would be lost in that large city. It would be a hopeless attempt to look for her on the following day. There were so many places she might be going to: so many platforms from which she might be starting. It would be only by a fluke that he could find her, and he was in no mood to rely on flukes. Paris, though; with Paris it might be different.

He pressed the bell at the corner of his desk and lifted the speaking tube.

"When does the air mail leave," he asked, "for Paris?"

There was a moment's delay.

"Twelve o'clock from Croydon," he was told. "And the car leaves Northumberland Avenue at eleven."

At eleven o'clock: but there was no chance of his getting to the Victoria Hotel in forty minutes. He would have to go all the way out to South Kensington to fetch his passport. That alone would be a good half-hour; and to be back again in time. No, no, it was not possible. But to get to Croydon before twelve, that was another matter.

He jumped up from his desk, gathered together his hat and stick and gloves, and ran out into the passage. He paused scarcely to knock on the door of his immediate superior.

"It's like this," he said breathlessly. "I know it's

a lot to ask. But it's very important, and it's very private. I've got to go to Paris, and at once. I'll be back by Friday morning. I can't explain. But I want you to let me go."

His chief leant back in his chair and smiled.

"It's a long time since you've had a holiday," he said. "I expect you need it."

"It's not a holiday."

"A rest cure?"

"Not even that."

The smile on his chief's face widened.

"Ah, well," he said. "You can call it what you like. It comes to the same thing. And we'll see you back again by Friday?"

"Then I may go?"

His chief nodded.

"And mind you come back refreshed."

With a high and beating heart Graham dashed along the passage to his secretary's room: clattered out a series of instuctions that were as precise as they were hurried. "And look here," he finished, "get on to the Imperial Airways at once and tell them to reserve me a seat on the twelve o'clock Paris service."

His secretary lifted her eyes towards the window. The flag from the summit of a block of buildings across the road was flapping furiously: the column of smoke from a tall, wide chimney was wavering gustily and uncertainly. The window frame was rattling in its socket. "A bad day to fly," she thought. "I shouldn't be surprised if it wasn't too bad for them to go."

. . . . . .

There is not in man's possession that power of divination which can distinguish a fast from a sluggish taxicab.

The cab in whose direction Graham waved an imperious and impatient hand looked to be no more battered, no more weather-beaten than the half-dozen

other mud-stained cars that were creeping with lifted signals beside the pavement.

He was, however, speedily to discover that it would have been scarcely possible for two such dejected specimens of machinery to have passed simultaneously through the same street. From Ludgate Circus to Charing Cross a good six minutes, another four to the bottom of St. James's. They would not at this rate get to Kensington till well after eleven, which would mean less than forty minutes for the journey to the aerodrome. And it was essential that he should be there in time. It was the one chance of saving Gwen from what might be irretrievable disaster.

He could not be certain, of course, that it was for Paris that she was bound. It might be to Brussels that she was going. Or it might be some other city along the route. It was more likely, though, to be Paris than any other place. And Paris, anyhow, was the one place that he could reach in time.

By three o'clock at the latest they should be at Le Bourget. By a quarter to four they would be in the Avenue de l'Opéra. And thence to the Gare du Nord was a matter only of ten minutes. If she were on that two-fifteen train from Calais he would be there almost certainly in time to meet it.

She might not, of course, be on it. It might be that this wild rush of his across the Channel was destined to be unavailing. As long, though, as there was that chance of meeting her, as long as success was possible, it was not for him to consider the probabilities of failure.

Slowly the cab creaked and jolted its way to Piccadilly. It was a quarter to eleven by the clock beside the Berkeley. Heavens, but this would never do.

Impatiently he tapped upon the window, jumped out into the street, paid an indignant driver his exact figure, and waved a hand towards the nearest cab rank.

This time he was luckier. Smoothly, swiftly, the

car sped westwards along the gleaming road; at rest Graham leant back against the cushioned seat. Another ten minutes and they would be there.

His mother was out luckily. There was no one to delay him with the burden of an improvised explanation. He bounded up the stairs, flung open his drawer, dived down into it regardless of the disarray of collars and handkerchiefs and ties that he was creating, unearthed his passport, shouted over the bannisters to a maid that probably he would be out that night, and rushed down the steps into the street.

"Croydon aerodrome!" he shouted. "And really fast."

It was a bleak, clouded, wind-swept day. The streets were for the most part empty. Such people as were upon the pavement were walking with hurried, intent steps, as though they would finish as soon as possible such business as had brought them from the warmth and comfort of their homes and offices.

There they were, Graham told himself, the puppets of custom and routine, fulfilling in the usual way at the usual time the usual services.

For them the day was as every other day; as yesterday had been and to-morrow would be; this day that was to him of such momentous import; that for as long as he lived would be one of the landmarks on the calendar. This day meant nothing special to them.

It was a curious thought that he, through whose veins drama was so fiercely beating, was breathing the same air in the same streets as all these others for whom the day was passing in such quiet raiment. How often must he himself in buses and tubes and cinemas have sat with unstirred pulse next one to whom life was at the moment speaking with heightened and inflamed accents? All these people seemingly so one with another, so much a section of the same machine, and yet how apart actually, how separate in the peace or turmoil of their lives.

. . . . . .

"I rather doubt if they will fly to-day. It's pretty rough." Those were the first words he heard, as he walked into the main waiting-room, where the tickets were being examined and the luggage weighed.

And as he looked out through the window across the aerodrome, he could see how gustily the flags above the sheds were waving. Round the blue-coated sergeant a group of some dozen or so passengers was gathered.

"When shall we be told?" one of them was asking fretfully. "It's most important that I should be able to let my friends in Paris know if we have to wait."

"In twenty minutes," the patient, courteous, but not untired voice informed her.

"And do you think they'll let us go?"

"How can I say, madam?"

"But you must have some idea; you've seen how rough it's been on other days. Have you known the aeroplanes to go up on days as rough as this?"

Graham did not stay to listen. There was nothing to be learnt from this circle of comment and conjecture. He moved quickly across the room to where in a small group behind the counter a number of officials were standing talking.

"My name," he said, "is G. S. Moreton. My secretary rang up an hour ago to book a seat on the twelve o'clock service."

The official spread his hands sideways in a diplomatic gesture of regret.

"And we had, Mr. Moreton, with the greatest possible reluctance, to inform your secretary that every place on the twelve o'clock service was engaged."

"What?" He stood gazing stupidly with open mouth at the tall, courteous, elegant person who had answered him. "But, surely——" he began.

"At such short notice," the official explained, "it would only have been by a piece of luck that we should have been able to allot a seat to you."

"Surely you could have used a machine with more accommodation?"

"We have already engaged the largest machine we have. I assure you, Mr. Moreton, that with the best will in the world we cannot help you. There is a seat, though, in the afternoon service."

"That's no use to me," Graham replied wretchedly.

"Then I am afraid, Mr. Moreton——"

But Graham was not to be easily discountenanced.

"Look here," he said. "Don't you think you could persuade one of these people here to take the later service? It can't matter so desperately to all of them. There must be one or two who could go just as well by the later one."

The official smiled.

"I doubt whether any of them will want to stay in this not particularly exciting waiting-room for three more hours than they need."

"You might ask them."

The official inclined his head.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced, "there is a gentleman here who tells me that it is particularly important that he should reach Paris this afternoon. There is not any room for him on the car, but he wondered whether, in the event of our being able to make the trip, one or other of you would care to take his place on the four o'clock service in exchange for yours."

There was a silence; the sort of silence that always does follow an unexpected announcement, when everyone is waiting for someone else to speak.

"What sort of business is it?" an elderly sententious-looking person hazarded at last.

"It is business," Graham answered, "of an extremely important and private nature."

The elderly personage emitted a contemptuous snort.

"I know that sort of business," he remarked, "and I can see no reason why any of us should surrender our places for it."

"There is no reason at all," Graham replied quietly. "There rarely is for any particularly courteous action."

There was a little laugh at that.

"I cannot say," Graham continued, "how extraordinarily grateful I should be if any one of you would help me."

But even as he glanced over the fourteen faces that were turned towards him, he knew that there was little chance of his succeeding.

Through the mind of each of them the same not unreasonable thought was passing: why should they sentence themselves to three or four solitary and tedious hours in an empty waiting-room, simply because a pleasant young man had chosen to behave pleasantly?

"It would be a great kindness," he repeated, but there was no reply. "Ah, well," he said, "I'm sorry," and a sensation of complete hopelessness descended on him. It was so essential that he should catch this service.

Was there nothing that he could do? And then suddenly, even as he wondered, the idea came to him.

"At least, I suppose I'm sorry," he added, "I can't honestly say I frightfully wanted to make the trip."

He spoke in an offhand, cheerful, confidential tone.

"That's a curious confession," the pompous and elderly gentleman remarked.

"Curious? Oh, I don't think so," Graham laughed. "As a responsible employee of an important firm I've got to do my best to carry out instructions, but duty and inclination don't go invariably hand in hand, and as a private individual I can't say that I was particularly looking forward to three hours in the air on such a day. I have, you see," he added, "made this trip a good many times before," and he pointed knowingly to where across the aerodrome the flags were flapping gustily.

There was, as he had anticipated, a stir of a not too comfortable interest.

"You think," an old lady ventured timidly, "that it will be a little rough?"

"I know," Graham announced cheerfully, "that it will be supremely foul." And after just so long a pause as was necessary for his words to create a suitable effect, he proceeded to expose the discomforts of aerial transport.

"You see," he continued, "it's like this."

On a great many occasions during the previous three years Graham had been forced to cross the Channel, and he had made the journey every time by air.

"There is no other way," he would assure his friends, "of travelling. At times you may, of course, be ill. But if you are ill by air you can assure yourself that you would be very much more ill by sea. You are ill, for one thing, a very great deal later, because you do not suggest the idea of sickness to yourself. If you are a bad sailor you tell yourself the moment you see the white horses from the train that you are destined for disaster. And, of course, you are. There are no white horses in the air. You do not make yourself ill. You wait till illness comes. And if you are ill, compare the appalling arrival at Calais or at Dover, the customs, the shrieking porters, the rush and bustle, the struggle for a seat, compare that with the tranquillity, the space, the leisure of Le Bourget. If you travelled once by air you would not travel any other way."

That was Graham's settled and announced opinion. But never had the case against aerial transport been presented more convincingly than it was by Graham Moreton that morning.

"You're certain, you see, to be ill," he said. "Any fool can tell that. Just look at those flags across the aerodrome. And you'll be ill in a stuffy atmosphere, with no privacy; with other people being ill in front of you and behind you and beside you. There's no worse fate, I should think, than being sick suddenly

in a drawing-room, in a crowd of strangers. And that's what being ill in an aeroplane feels like. I'm not sorry, I can assure you, to be out of it."

He spoke with the air of an extensively travelled man, and he could see that his words were having an effect.

"I shall think of you all," he laughed, "in about two hours' time, while I'm safe and at peace in my London office."

At that moment the main door of the office was flung open; a gust of chilling wind rushed in, and a blue-coated official announced that it had been decided to make the trip.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "will you please follow me?"

It was a bleak, cold, wind-swept day, and there was not one in that small party that did not shiver slightly as they made their way out into the open.

"Heavens!" Graham repeated, "I don't envy you." He spoke cheerfully enough, but his heart was pounding fiercely, and the roof of his mouth was dry.

Was it to fail, after all, this bluff of his? Was he to be forced to stand and watch from the ground the slim, wide-winged machine rise into the air? And standing there, to see, as the pale shape diminished and grew fainter, his one chance of rescuing Gwen Lawrence vanish?

The engines of the machine were buzzing noisily. There it stood, the large fourteen-placed machine—the machine that in three hours' time would be landing at Le Bourget.

He rested his hand against the blue-painted side. How maddening to think that this affair of wood and iron, which he was touching now, would be in three hours' time where he so longed to be, where it was impossible for him to be unless this hundred to one bluff came off!

One by one he watched the passengers climb up the wooden steps into the saloon. One by one he waved

his farewell to them. Only six left now. Only four, three, two. Gloomily, and with a sinking heart, he watched the last man climb the ladder.

One step, two steps, three steps, an attendant was preparing to help him into the saloon, when a sudden and providential gust of wind lifted his grey felt hat and blew it in a curving circle across the grass.

The wind was so strong that Graham had to run a good fifty yards before he could recover it, and he was panting when he returned with it to its owner.

"I'm sorry I was so long," he said. "But the wind's pretty strong. It needed chasing."

Slowly the man stretched out his hand towards the hat, twisted the brim nervously between his fingers, glanced apprehensively towards the fluttering flags, then in a quick impulsive burst:

"Look here," he said, "if it's so fearfully important for you to get to Paris this afternoon, I don't mind selling you my ticket."

There was a quiet smile; a quiet, cynical smile on Graham's face as he stepped into the saloon and took the fourteenth place.

"It's no good appealing to people's generosity," he told himself, "unless you can appeal to their self-interest at the same time."

His heart beat with a heavy exultation. Would Gwen be there? That was the one thing that mattered now. Would she be there?

CHAPTER XXI

BY AIR AND SEA

THE Paris train for a Thursday in September was comfortably uncrowded, and Gwen Lawrence had little difficulty in finding herself a corner seat; which was as well, for it had been a filthy crossing; two and a half hours and scarcely a calm minute in it. With a cushion arranged behind her head, she leant back, watching through half-closed eyes the familiar landmarks pass one by one behind her.

It was a journey that she had made many times. But never in quite this temper: never in quite this mood of lassitude and half regret. Always, before, she had gone expecting something, with something definite to look forward to; not as now, with something behind her to be forgotten.

For the third time in the space of seven minutes a young, not unhandsome man had walked past her carriage, and each time, as he had paused in the corridor, he had looked hesitatingly in her direction.

She had neither recognized nor met his glance. But her trained eye had taken in every detail of his appearance.

He was extremely well-dressed, suspiciously well-dressed, in fact. A man who spent as much on his clothes as that could not have a great deal of money to spend on other people's. The years had taught her to suspect that type of man. He was the male equivalent of herself. He was out too definitely to attract. As she lived on men, he lived on women; they were in the same position. That sort of man was unlikely to be of any use to her.

For the fourth time the young man was coming down the corridor. On this occasion he not only paused opposite her carriage but halted, and, resting his elbow on the brass window-bar, half turned so that he could watch at the same time the countryside and her. He was not only glancing, he was staring at her now: waiting for an opportunity to speak.

Was she to grant it him, she wondered? In London, certainly, she would not have thought him worth her while. But abroad and on journeys, she had usually allowed herself to profit by men's interest in her. It was always worth while to have one's lunch or dinner paid for, or to be given a lift in a taxi to wherever she wished to go. Why not, after all?

"Anyone for tea, anyone for tea?" An officious, blue-coated waiter was striding peremptorily down the train. "Anyone for tea?"

Lazily Gwen Lawrence lifted herself out of her corner, collected a couple of illustrated papers, straightened her hat in the narrow mirror above the seat, and walked out into the corridor.

The eyes of the young man, she knew, were on her; he had turned and was following closely at her heel. It would be easy enough now to give him the opportunity he sought. She had only to sit at a table by herself: and there were a good many empty tables in the restaurant car.

The train was not crowded, and the majority of the passengers were feeling too ill after their battered crossing to be in any need of food. On the right-hand side of the compartment there were a couple of empty tables.

A waiter came bowing forward.

"This way, madam," he said, and flicked with his napkin at the nearer table.

Over her shoulder, as she moved sideways towards the chair, she heard, or fancied that she heard, a sudden indrawn sigh of relieved anticipation.

But even as she moved a sensation of nausea over-

came her. No, she couldn't. She was tired of all that, tired to death of it. She couldn't. At any rate, not to-day.

Quickly she shook her head.

"No, thank you," she said. "I'll go over there." And she stepped to the other side of the compartment, where an old lady was sitting by herself.

There was a frown on the face of the young man as he walked past her—a frown of frustrated vanity.

The table to which he went was at the extreme end of the compartment, and the seat he chose had its back turned to her. She noted, however, that in the mirror on the carriage wall it was possible for him to watch her movements.

"It's not the first time," she told herself, "that he's played this game."

She was in no mood, however, to interest herself in the technique of gallantry. She was tired—desperately tired of it all. It was a poor game, this business of attracting men. May Julian had been right. A wretched game. But because it was the only game she knew, she had to go on playing it.

"Tea or chocolate, madam?" a waiter was inquiring.

Chocolate—oh yes, chocolate. And stretching out her hand, she selected from the collection of glass pots upon the table a small jar of honey.

Not that she was hungry. Mechanically she divided into two sections the small browned croissant, mechanically she spread on it a thin layer of butter, a thicker layer of honey. Mechanically she sipped at the warm, sweet chocolate. Her elbow rested on the table. She had turned away from the noise and chatter of the car to watch through a window, misted a little now by heat, the monotonous French landscape stream behind her.

Gustily over the flat coloured fields the wind was blowing, bending the straight trees that flanked the long straight roads. The leaves that had been fresh and

green in April were beginning to shrivel and turn brown. A few weeks now, and the golden glory of October would be spilt upon them; a few weeks, and the trees and fields and gardens would put on that mantle of beauty which the parching heat of summer had robbed them of: a few more weeks, and the golden glory would be at an end.

Bare and leafless in the rain and frost and wind the long tall trees would shiver. Only a little while and their transitory splendour would have gone; would have gone taking with it, as likely as not, this ache that so oppressed her.

She would live through it, as she had lived through so much else. There was nothing time could not cure, or nothing, rather, time could not kill. It could kill beauty, it could kill love, it could destroy the fresh innocence of spring, the rich glory of July, the opulent autumn splendour. Time, that could destroy all things, could kill, surely, in the end, her grief.

For a while this love of hers for Graham was going to hurt horribly. But it would end. To suffering as to all else there was a limit set.

But it was not only the misting of the window glass with the room's heat that dimmed for her the sharp outlines of the countryside, through which the train leapt and bounded on its way to Paris.

. . . . . .

The aerodrome at Le Bourget is normally one of the least disturbed places in an untranquil universe, and for such commotion as was afoot there, Graham Moreton was personally and solely culpable.

That he should be creating such a disturbance was not under the circumstances surprising. It was ten minutes to four, and there were no immediate signs of willingness on the part of the other passengers to follow their luggage into the large motor-chara-banc that was waiting for them in the square.

It would have been equally surprising had there been any such display. The machine had left Croydon

twenty-five minutes late, and had been flying the whole time into a particularly strong wind. The journey had taken over three hours, and had been a particularly exacting one. There was no one who was not grateful on his arrival for a few quiet moments with a brandy-and-soda or a cup of coffee.

No one, with the exception of Graham.

From the moment the machine had risen from the ground he had endured agonies of anxiety and suspense. It had been rougher than he had expected. Sometimes the machine had rocked from side to side; sometimes it had dropped alarmingly in air pockets. He had been terrified lest they should be forced to land at Lympne. He had realized also that they were not travelling at anything like the usual speed. Stage by stage he had followed the journey on the map. They had been fifty minutes in the air, and were still not out of England.

With strained and harassed eyes he had peered through the mist of cloud for the lighthouse of Dungeness, that appears always, by some delusion of the eye as you fly towards it, to be stationed at the summit of an immense cliff of sand. Would it never come, that ultimate projection of the shore?

And then there had been a nerve-testing half-hour when the machine had risen above the clouds and he was unable to tell what progress was being made. At any other time he would have delighted in that magnificent expanse of billowed snow, white and soft and clean, with the rich sun tinting it and the blue sky spread over it like a tent. But Graham had no eyes for any beauty at that moment.

Of one thing only could he think: that he should reach Paris in time to warn Gwen Lawrence of her danger; and as long as this white carpet was stretched beneath them, he could not tell how near or how far they were.

Occasionally through a rift of cloud he could catch a glimpse of the earth below him, a glimpse, however,

that could tell him little. Once he fancied that he could detect a town. Abbeville or Amiens, he wondered? As far as time went, they should have reached Amiens by now. But you could not tell with this wind against you. They seemed to be going fast enough. In the same way that in a motor-car one seemed always to be going faster in the dark. You could not tell. There was no way of telling until this carpet of cloud parted.

He had not known during the whole journey one happy instant. And now, when they were safely landed, now when they were within thirty minutes of the Gare du Nord, it was maddening that there should be this purposeless delay.

"When are we going to start?" he asked the customs officer.

"In a moment," he was told. "It has been a rough passage. It is not good to hurry them."

"But I am in a hurry."

The officer shrugged his shoulders.

"There are few things," he said, "that do not improve with waiting."

"Trains won't wait."

"A train, ah, a train; that is a different matter. I will see what can be done." And, walking across from group to group, he explained that one of the party was in a particular hurry to catch a train, and would they be so very kind . . .

The most reluctant of all to leave was the sententious and elderly person who had received Graham so ill-humouredly at Croydon. It had been an unhappy trip for him. Matters had not been improved by Graham's remark that, ill though he might be in the air, he would have been a great deal more so had he been on sea.

"Don't talk to me about a fire!" he had snapped, "when I'm in a frying-pan."

"What! That young man again?" he almost shouted when the customs officer had whispered the

request. "That young man has been for the last four hours the most infernal nuisance that I have encountered in my life. He worried us at Croydon. He worried us in the air. He's worrying us now. Shall we never be rid of him!"

"The sooner we start, the sooner——"

"I dare say," he interrupted testily, "but I'm feeling very tired, and my coffee's very hot, and I'm not going to hurry it."

It was four o'clock before the car began its rattling journey over the uneven cobbled road.

. . . . . .

"How marvellous to be in Paris again!" murmured a woman at Graham's side. "I feel ten years younger when I see the boulevards."

But for the first time in Graham's life Paris was meaning nothing to him. The boulevards, the restaurants, the cafés, were just places to be hurried past on his way to Gwen. He was scarcely conscious of the strong pervading, curiously personal smell of Paris that is to be found in no other city of the world. His eyes were fixed upon the minute hand of his watch.

Five-past. Ten-past. There was an infuriating delay of two minutes at the toll-gate. Quarter-past. Twenty-past.

And in ten minutes Gwen's train would be steaming into the Gare du Nord. Only ten minutes. There would never be time.

By a rapid process of mental arithmetic and geography he decided that by stopping the car here and taking a taxi straight he could save at least three minutes. He would be traversing three sides of a quadrilateral by going first to the Avenue de l'Opéra.

Leaning forward in his seat he shouted over three intermediary rows.

"Hi, could you stop the car here, please?"

The elderly and sententious gentleman turned fiercely on him.

"What, you again, sir!"

" For the last time, though," and, jumping quickly into the street, he was running before the last syllable was uttered in the direction of a friendly taxi.

" Gare du Nord," he gasped.

And as the minute hand of his watch touched the number five, with such precarious speed as the cabs of London know not, the draughty and shaking box hooted and rattled its way eastwards. In under four minutes and with the narrowest avoidance of three collisions, the network of intervening streets had been unravelled.

The platform was turgid with noise and bustle. Porters were shrieking: representatives of tourist agencies were attempting to gather their flocks round them: middle-aged women were gesticulating fiercely above the relics of their belongings.

Calm and aloof, amid the turmoil, Gwen Lawrence was leaning against the short-handled squat umbrella while two porters were disputing the disposition of her luggage.

She was wearing the same claret-coloured coat in which so many weeks back she had come to lunch with him. And the same hat had been pulled low upon her forehead.

But there was no longer that sense of approaching summer in her face. Her head was dropping slightly; her mouth was limp and her eyes were lustreless. For all, though, that she was tired and dishevelled, the fatal garment of her beauty was still about her.

He touched her on the arm.

" Gwen," he said.

There was surprise foremost in the expression of her face: surprise and welcome: a welcome that was curiously changed to fear.

" Graham," she said. " You here! " And the words came slowly as in a gasp.

" To see you," he answered.

" Me? But I never told you——"

" I know; I rang up this morning. They told me you'd gone away. I followed you."

"Followed me, how?"

"By air, it was the only way."

There were fear now and astonishment in the golden, amber-coloured eyes.

"The luggage, madam?" the successful porter was insisting.

"Oh, yes, the luggage."

Wearily, confusedly, as though the pressure of the situation had grown too tense for her, Gwen Lawrence drew the back of her hand across her forehead.

"My luggage," she repeated. "Oh, yes, of course. Take it to the Hôtel Splendor. I'll come on afterwards."

Wearily, confusedly, she allowed for a moment the long-lashed eyelids to droop upon her eyes.

"I don't understand," she said. "You learnt I'd gone. You followed me. By air. You had to see me. Why, though, Graham, why?"

Through a mist she waited for the words she knew must come; the words that she had so dreaded, that she had so longed to hear; the stammered avowal of his love of her; the love that had driven him across Europe after her.

"Why," she repeated, "why?"

"Those shares," he answered.

"Shares?" she lingered over the word, a stupid, dazed expression on her face. "Shares, what shares? I don't understand; what do you mean?"

"The Florida Asiatics."

"But what about them?"

"They've gone down, I was afraid you might not have seen."

"I hadn't, but even so, what does it matter? We've sold them days ago."

"But the other ones you had."

"What others?"

"The ones you told me of. The ones that another broker bought."

"Oh, those," and she laughed, a nervous little high-pitched laugh, and nervously at her throat the

slim gloved fingers fluttered. "I had only a couple of them, as a side bet with a friend. They can go down to a halfpenny for all I care."

"Only a couple? Then——" He paused, not knowing what to do or what to say. He felt weak beyond words, weak in the reaction of the last six hours; weak and a little foolish also.

How ridiculous must this wild rush of his across the Channel seem to her. So much fuss about a couple of shares and a loss at the most of eighty pounds.

"If that was all, then——" he began, but she interrupted him.

"I don't quite understand," she said. "Won't you take me and give me a chocolate somewhere, and we can talk?"

In silence they walked together out of the huge, sooted, black-domed station.

"There's not too bad a place," she told him, "about half-way down that second street."

He nodded his head, and still in silence they walked towards it.

CHAPTER XXII

IN PARIS AND ALONE

IT was fairly empty inside the café. The hour of the apéritif had not yet come, and tea was not a meal to be taken frequently in so remote a quarter. For Gwen he ordered a chocolate. For himself a coffee.

"And a plate of *petits fours*," he added.

Side by side they sat on a red plush, ill-sprung seat; side by side in silence.

The street outside was empty for the most part of trams and taxicabs. The wind that had blown so strongly all the day had dropped a little. And over the painted houses and faded shop-fronts waveringly a shaft of sunlight flickered. Upon the stress of the afternoon a spirit of tranquillity had descended.

Gwen Lawrence leant forward across the table, her chin rested on the latticed bridge of her long, white fingers.

"Well, Graham?" she said.

Her face, which was shadowed by the low drawn brim of her felt hat, was turned away from him. So still was she that she appeared to be scarcely listening as he answered her.

"It was like this," he said; and he told her of how Humphrey had rung him up that morning to tell him of the collapse of Florida Asiatics; told her of the panic that had seized him lest she might still be holding the shares through ignorance of their fate.

"I didn't know, you see, what arrangement you had made with your broker," he explained. "I didn't

know how many shares or how few you held. I remember your saying, ' Practically all I've got,' and I didn't know if you had meant that as a joke. So, of course, I had to ring you up."

He told her of his conversation with the char.

" I felt certain," he said, " that you would be going either to Brussels or to Paris. I knew that I couldn't get to Brussels in time to stop you, but that I could to Paris. I couldn't be certain of finding you. But it was all that I could do. And I had to try it."

He told her of his rush to Croydon, of his arguments with the passengers, of the ruse by which he had eventually secured himself a seat. He described the anxieties of the trip, the delay at the aerodrome, the audacities of the Parisian taxicab.

" I got there," he finished, " at twenty-nine past four. A minute before your train arrived. And I suppose," he added, with a rather awkward laugh, " that I must look pretty ridiculous chasing after you like this, when nothing was actually at stake at all."

She did not reply at first. Her head was turned from him. He could not see how the golden-coloured eyes were misted, could not see how dilated they had grown and tender; tender where had been so little tenderness before.

" Ridiculous," she said, " because you were afraid that I was in danger of losing money, although you could not know how little or how great the danger was, although you could not even tell whether this effort would save me from it, in spite of all the excellent arguments against your coming. . . . Oh no, Graham, not ridiculous."

He laughed nervously.

" It wasn't anything," he said, " when a friend's concerned."

" A friend, and what sort of a friend? A friend that but for this you wouldn't ever have seen willingly again. For you wouldn't, Graham Moreton. You can't look me in the face and say you would."

She had turned almost fiercely upon him; her face was close to his, the dead white face with its damson mouth and flaming golden eyes.

"Would you, Graham Moreton? But for this would you have ever come willingly into my life again?"

He tried to turn aside the moment with a laugh, to restore their relationship to its old plane of easy comradeship. But she was too sincere, and the situation was too tense.

He could not look into that face, into those eyes, and pretend that they were ordinary friends, meeting ordinarily. He had to reply truthfully.

"If it had been," he said, "that but for this I should never have again seen you, it wouldn't have been because I didn't want to meet you."

On her lips and in her eyes flickered a brief smile of triumph. They were coming at last, the first slow words of the confession that had been so long delayed.

"Then why?" she insisted. "Why, why?"

Her face as she spoke was moved closer to his, so close that he could feel on his cheek her warm and perfumed breath. And he felt weak suddenly, and powerless, alone here in a foreign city, against this force he had resisted so desperately and so long; this force that had come to symbolize for him all that men had hungered for and fought for, that limitless desire for romance, for the mysterious, the unknown.

During the half-minute's length of that searching, penetrating glance he felt one by one his defences going down.

"Why, Graham Moreton?" she repeated. "Why?"

"Because," he answered, so softly that the words were almost whispered, "because I was desperately afraid."

As she heard spoken at last the words that she had so longed to hear, her eyes half-closed and her lips half-parted, and on her face was such an expression of

passive ecstasy as parched plants must know when after a long drought the rain refreshes them.

"Frightened? But there was no need to be frightened of me," she repeated. And turning away she looked once again through the open doorway into the street.

The sun was shining now. On roof and chimney-stacks lingered caressingly its softly diffused radiance. Above them the sky was blue. Into her lungs she drew slowly a long, deep breath. Ah, but how life renewed itself! It was not only happiness that was impermanent. Sorrow was equally short-lived. Life gave even as it took away. This hour at least it had given her to love in, and to be loved.

"And if it hadn't been for those ridiculous shares we might never have met again," she said. "And I should have had to spend a tediously dull evening by myself in the worst city in the world to be alone in."

"But I ought," Graham protested, "to be thinking of my next train."

She laughed at that, a light-hearted, gay-eyed laugh.

"My dear Graham, don't be absurd," she said. "You came here to help me in one way, which was very charming of you. Surely you aren't going to deny me help in another? You'll surely help me to make what would have been a wretched evening entertaining. You will? But of course you will. Garçon, a paper, please. And while you order me an apéritif, I'll decide what show you'll take me to. We'll dance, of course, afterwards," she added, "at the Moulin d'Or."

. . . . . .

The Café de l'Après Midi is not one of the restaurants of which you will read in memoirs and in novels. The room is comfortable and is never empty, the food is good, the cellar adequate, but fame and fashion have neglected it. It is not one of the places to which you go to have people pointed out to you, and you will in consequence rarely hear it spoken of by English and Americans. Gwen and Graham went there

for no other reason than that they had never been to it before.

"Let's go somewhere," she had said, "where neither of us has ever been before, where neither of us will ever go again: some place that we shall never think of with any associations but our own."

And so they strolled negligently down the Boulevard des Italiens, and northwards up the Faubourg de Montmartre.

"What about that place?" he had said at length; "it looks bright enough. And I've certainly never been into it before."

"Nor I," she said. "Let's try it, Graham."

For a long while they pondered together over the menu.

"It's most important," she explained, "that we should make a success of this. It's the first time we've ever dined together; almost certainly it'll be the last. There won't be any second chance to remedy our mistakes."

They spoke jokingly enough of it, as the last time they would be together. The time had not come yet for them to be unhappy. There were six, seven, eight hours, perhaps, still in front of them.

"I think," she announced after a protracted study of the long, ornately-decorated card, "I think that I shall begin with *Bisque d'Homard*; something quiet ought to follow it. An omelette, you suggest. A kidney omelette, and a bird; what bird's in season now, or don't they have seasons for birds in Paris? The waiter suggests grouse, and an iced fruit salad with it. A good suggestion. And we'd better finish it with *crêpes suzette*. The wine list now. I'll let you choose the wine. That's a man's job, only not champagne. I'm tired of champagne. And it's so certain to be sweet."

In the end he chose a Corton.

But they might have left the selection of the dinner to the waiter for all the notice they took of the various

dishes that were set before them; they might as well have been eating stale sandwiches at a station buffet. They were conscious only of themselves, and of this brief moment of time that was granted them to be together.

"And you're going where," he asked, "tomorrow?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know," she said. "I've made no plans."

Incredulously he raised his eyebrows.

"I just felt tired," she said. "I came away. Just that. To be away. That was all I wanted."

"And yet you ought to find life terribly entertaining."

"Entertaining," she laughed, a brief, mocking little laugh. "I don't know what there is in it to be called that."

"Your friends, your freedom."

"Freedom! Do you know what freedom is? It's the loneliest thing beneath the sun. It means that you're not afraid of losing anything. That there's nothing you can't dispense with. That's loneliness, to be like that."

"With so many people to whom you matter?"

Again she shrugged her shoulders.

"I expect," she said, "that they could manage without me as easily as I could manage without them."

In the balcony above the restaurant an orchestra was playing softly. From the street outside came the confused murmur of a city's traffic. Within the room on all sides of them was a clatter of plates, a scurrying of waiters, a surge of conversation. Islanded in that ebbing sea of sound, they looked deeply into each other's eyes.

"There are one or two," he said, "who are going to find it pretty difficult."

She made no answer. Difficult, perhaps. But how much more difficult for her. He had Joan to go back to—Joan, who loved him, who would medicine him

back to happiness. There was his work. There were his games: there were his clubs and friends; the innumerable interests and enthusiasms that make up the background of men's lives. For a while the loss of her would hurt him. She must mean something to him. You didn't rush across Europe after a woman that meant nothing to you. She mattered to him all right. He would find it difficult, but he would not find it impossible, to replace her. He would not return, as she would be returning, to a world emptied of excitement.

She remembered the sensation of nausea that had overcome her in the train: remembered how she had found impossible for her that monotonous game of attraction she had played so long. If she had found that game impossible then, how much more impossible would she find it now; now that she had this proof that Graham cared for her?

And she would have to return to it; she knew that. There would be nothing else for her to do.

She shuddered as she pictured the life that awaited her. The scheming, the insincerity, the deceit, with all the time this ache in her heart for Graham.

Still, for this brief hour, at any rate, he was hers.

. . . . . .

They had taken seats for a revue at the Concert Mayol called "Cachez Ça," and as it was early they decided to walk there from the restaurant.

The day that had begun so gustily was closing softly. The wind had dropped; the pale violet of the sky was unflecked by clouds. Faintly over the sable stretch of roofs the outline of a sundered moon was showing.

"It'll be a wonderful night," he murmured.

The boulevard was crowded, noisy with light and colour. In café after café there was not a vacant table. So full of life this city, and with themselves so utterly alone in it.

At the corner of the Faubourg Montmartre he placed

his hand upon her arm to guide her across the road. The soft flesh trembled as his fingers touched it. Troublingly her powdered fragrance rose about him. Her shoulder touched lightly against his. In silence, his hand still upon her arm, they walked along the boulevard. He scarcely dared to breathe for fear of breaking the moment's magic.

A taxi with lifted signal was passing beside them along the pavement. Impetuously Graham waved his hand at it.

"Do you mind?" he said huskily. "It's so marvellous. I thought we might drive for a moment in the Bois."

She inclined her head.

Flooded with beauty, the dark fragrant spaces were stretched about them. Through the trees under the moonlight the receding waterways were burnished spears of silver. Above them the violet of the sky was deepening to purple. In the west the soft after-greens of sunset still lingered faintly. Down the long curving avenues an endless stream of cars and taxicabs was passing. An endless stream of lovers clasped close in the cushioned darkness, indifferent to the occasional revealing gleam of lamp and headlight; indifferent to scrutiny; indifferent to censure; indifferent to everything but the need and nearness of each other. From the shadowed distances rose the rich fragrance of an autumn night.

Silent, and with half-closed eyes, Gwen Lawrence lay back in the corner of the taxi. From time to time, as the car jolted over the uneven gravel, her shoulder brushed lightly against his. On the seat between them the little fingers of their hands were touching.

But she was not certain that she wanted him to take her hand in his, was not certain that she wanted to hear now the stammered words of passion. There was a time for all things; the time would come when her body would tremble for the need of his arms about it; when her lips would part, dry and expectant, for

his kiss; when her ears would strain for the broken, beating words.

It would come soon enough, in its own time, that moment. It was enough that they were together now. Through a mist she heard him speaking to her.

"Nothing, whatever happens," he was saying, "can take away the marvel of this night from us. It's ours for all time. We'll have had this whatever happens."

She made no answer. There was no answer to be made. This, whatever might come to them, was theirs. Nothing could take this from them; that on a scented September night they had driven, hand resting against hand, through the Bois on the brink of an avowal.

They were touching now, it might well be indeed, the highest point that their loving of each other would ever reach. Never again might they care so much. Things happened that way sometimes. Still, there was this moment first.

After the dim quiet of the Bois their eyes and ears were dazed by the light and noise of the Champs Élysées. Through the thronged and sounding boulevards the cab rattled its way unevenly towards the Concert Mayol, and a sensation of fatigue replaced the exultation that a few minutes earlier had sent the blood beating so swiftly through Gwen's veins.

Wearily she rested the back of her hand against her forehead. Out of a world of illusion they had returned to a condition of reality. From the world that they could dream in, into the world that they had got to live in: the world of promises and obligations, the world of limitless to-morrows.

With a jolt and a rattle the cab drew up beside the pavement. While Graham grappled with the intricacies of the French coinage, Gwen Lawrence stood watching the crowd with customary unpunctuality filter its way some fifteen minutes after the advertised time of the performance into the entrance of the theatre.

"Not that there would be much to miss," she thought, "for half an hour."

Graham was standing with his back towards the theatre, his head bent down and forward over a complicated bundle of paper money, from which he appeared to be disentangling the correct sum with the greatest difficulty and not a great deal of success; and as Gwen Lawrence stood waiting without impatience for him, she became conscious slowly of a curious and appraising glance that was being fixed on her from the doorway of a restaurant on the opposite side of the road.

"I know that girl," she thought, and, lifting her eyes she returned the glance.

For a moment their eyes met in a look of recognition, but of unacknowledgment. For a moment unwaveringly they stared each other in the face. Then the young girl turned away, touched the sleeve of an elderly gentleman: a commissionaire was beckoned to, a whistle was blown, and a taxi had drawn up between them, obscuring her.

"There we are," Graham was saying cheerfully. "So sorry I've been so long. Everything was in a most appalling mess. Now we can enjoy ourselves."

Thoughtfully Gwen turned and followed Graham into the theatre. Had she seen him, she wondered, the girl with flaxen hair and the cornflower-blue eyes? There had been the taxicab between them, but she could not tell how long she had been standing. And would she have stared quite so hard at her had she not seen Graham first?

"I wonder," she asked herself as the attendant led her to her seat, "I wonder if I ought to tell him?"

. . . . . .

"N'oubliez. N'oubliez. N'oubliez."

With a shaking of elbows and a rustling of skirts, the chorus of the Moulin d'Or tripped its way down from the small stage at the far end of the cabaret to

prance in uneven line on the narrow stretch of the polished dancing floor.

" N'oubliez. N'oubliez. N'oubliez."

A glimmering sheet of silver under the hard radiance of the limelight, with fluttering wrists and outstretched gleaming arms, La Folle Désirée swayed sideways and backwards from her hips to the music's ragged rhythm.

" N'oubliez. N'oubliez. N'oubliez."

From the shadowed, congested tables the refrain was echoed back. Forks were tapping the tune on plates and glasses; heels were beating in time upon the floor. Here and there came the note, clear and penetrating, of a whistle. The lips and eyes of the dozen swaying figures in the silver pool of limelight mirrored the gaiety and laughter and animation of that crowded room.

" N'oubliez. N'oubliez. N'oubliez."

On a sudden crashing chord the music ceased. The slim swaying girls sank backwards with arms outflung, upon their heels; poised there a moment while the sea of clapping and applause burst over them, then, leaping to their feet scampered away hurriedly to their dressing-rooms.

From the orchestra broke noisily the first notes of a recent foxtrot. Lights were flashed on again about the room. The huddled group of waiters beside the kitchen door dispersed. There was a popping of corks; a clatter of plates; a ripple of talk and laughter.

A slim, graceful man rose from his seat and stretched out his hand to the girl beside him. With slow, languid steps he drew her into the rhythm of the dance. For a moment they danced alone; then another couple joined them, and another. In a few moments the narrow strip of floor was crowded.

They were dancing shoulder to shoulder almost. Only the most skilful dancers could do more than walk. There was a waving of hands, a hailing of acquaintances, a shouting of Christian names. Eyes

were bright and lips were laughing. Trouble and the to-morrows of the world were put aside. On the many-stringed lute of the gay city's gaiety here momentarily the fingers of happiness had trembled.

Sad, however, and irresponsive, Gwen Lawrence and Graham Moreton sat side by side at their round table against the wall. It was half-past two. Only a few moments remained to them of the space of hours that at dinner time had seemed so ample.

"In fourteen hours' time," he was saying to her, "I shall be in London."

She was leaning forward across the table in that attitude so characteristic of her, her chin rested on the white and latticed bridge of her slim fingers, her face turned from him.

"It was hard before," he said. "I don't know how I'm going to endure it now. It's gone too deep."

At his side a waiter was lifting from its bed of broken ice the obligatory bottle of champagne. But the bottle was still half full and their glasses scarcely a quarter empty. With a sucking sound the bottle sank back again into the bucket.

The waiter hesitated, then moved away. It was useless to invite a further order. They were too concerned with one another. The *foie gras* savoury on their plates was scarcely touched. His time could be spent more profitably at other tables.

"You don't need to be told," Graham was saying, "that I'm in love with you."

It was the first time that the word "love" had been used between them. And it was in keeping that it should be spoken here, in this crowded room, with the stage so unset for protestation; in keeping with the conduct so unpremeditated and so unforeseen of their love's development.

He had never meant to fall in love with her—she knew that now. And she had meant merely to make him pay for his imagined treachery.

"I guessed," she answered.

"It was because I was afraid of meeting you that I sold those shares, because I wanted to free myself of the excuse and cause of meeting you, because I thought that if I never saw you again I should be able to forget you."

"And would you have?"

"I shan't now be able to."

Softly, over the undulating couples, was murmured the languid rhythm of a tango. With slow, gliding steps, now short, now long, the few dancers that were capable of its intricacies patterned the floor with an elaborate and Eastern elegance.

"Can you do this?" Gwen asked abruptly.

He nodded.

"Very well; let's try it, then."

It was the first time that they had danced that evening. The first time that, loving her, he had held her in his arms.

"If only you knew," he whispered, "how much I love you!"

The cool softness of her arm drew him more closely to her. The vague fragrance of her hair was nearer to his cheek.

"So much," he whispered, "so terribly much! And to-morrow," he added, as they walked back at the dance's close towards their table, "to-morrow I'll be alone in London."

Alone, but not so alone, she thought, as she would be. There was that girl of his, after all, who loved him, whom he would marry, who would teach him to forget.

"Did you know," she asked suddenly, "that that girl of yours was here in Paris?"

"Joan?"

"Yes. Did you know?"

Joan in Paris! But, of course, she would be, if she were to return to London on the following day. It had never occurred to him that he and she would be there together.

"She was standing," Gwen continued, "in the

doorway of the hotel opposite while you were settling with the taxi."

"Did she notice me?"

"I don't know. There was the taxi between you. But I don't know how long she was standing there. She may have seen you. Would it matter much?"

He shrugged his shoulders. Matter? Did anything matter much; anything except the loss so imminent of this so loved woman? Perhaps it was better on the whole that Joan had seen. It would make easier the inevitable explanation.

"No, I don't suppose it matters much," he said.

The words were spoken tonelessly, without any sort of animation, and Gwen Lawrence felt her blood beat the quicker as she heard them. He loved her as much as that, then; it did not really matter to him whether his simpering schoolgirl knew or did not know.

A soft glow of triumph caressed and warmed her. A glow, though, that subsided quickly. To what use could she turn her victory? If only she were free! And she recalled ironically how so few months earlier she had refused her husband's offer of divorce, that she might be at greater liberty to follow what she had described to May Julian laughingly as her profession.

"You may be fearfully sorry for it one day," May Julian had cautioned her.

Well, and May Julian had been right; had been right, too, when she had warned her that one day she might fall in love herself; that in the person of some man as yet unknown to her, all these other men whose love for her she had flaunted and exploited would take their revenge on her. Well, and if they were, what of it? She'd see it through.

"I'm tired, Graham," she said. "Let's go back."

. . . . . .

It was only when they had paid the bill and were standing in the vestibule, while the immense and liveried commissionaire busied himself about a taxi, that Graham realized that he had nowhere to go back to.

"I never thought of booking a room," he said. "And at this time of night and without any luggage there's nowhere I could get taken in."

For scarcely a second Gwen Lawrence delayed her answer.

"That'll be all right," she said. "There's a sofa in my sitting-room at the hotel. You can sleep on that."

The night porter at the Hôtel Splendor accepted the return of Gwen with a young and unluggaged man as an event too customary for comment. He was neither distrustful nor ingratiating.

"A room for monsieur? At this hour?" he said. "Ah, but it would not, I fear, be possible. There is no room prepared. To-morrow there will be nothing simpler. But to-night—I am afraid, no."

"Then my friend," Mrs. Lawrence informed him, "will sleep upon the sofa. You will send up breakfast for both of us to-morrow morning."

Soundlessly, through the sleeping house, the lift shot upwards. Soundlessly they walked down the silent passages, past the succession of locked rooms with their boots and shoes arranged singly and in pairs outside them. The key turned in the door of Gwen's private suite.

After the chill of the draughty taxicab the room seemed warm; lit softly by the faint glow of a gas fire that was burning at half pressure.

"How thoughtful of them," Gwen murmured. "Oh, but I feel lazy, Graham." And, sinking down on to the sofa, she let the grey chinchilla cloak fall backwards from her shouders. "Give me a cigarette, there's a dear. And you might turn on the fire full."

It was a largish fire and its rich glow filled the room with a pleasant twilight, lending to the very ordinarily furnished place an agreeable sense of poetry.

"Not a bad sofa, this," Gwen said. "With a blanket and a rug you ought not to be uncomfortable."

Graham made no reply. He was not in the mood to

chatter indifferently of indifferent things. Too much had happened, too much had been said, during the last twelve hours, to permit of evasion now. He leant forward on the edge of the sofa, his hands stretched out towards the fire; his face ruddily brown against the surrounding darkness.

"You're very silent," Gwen Lawrence said at length.

"Better be silent than—oh, I don't know. I suppose you're thinking me a fearful cad."

"Cad, Graham?"

"For making love to you when I'm engaged to someone else. For saying I love you, when love's an impossibility between us: when, whatever I felt, I ought to have stayed silent. I suppose that's being a cad, isn't it?" He paused on a note of interrogation. "I suppose it is," he went on, as she made no answer. "But for all that, you know, I wouldn't have it any different. I'm glad you know. I'm glad I've told you. I don't know why I should be, but I am. I care so fearfully, you see."

Still she remained silent. But her head dropped forward a little on her breast, and on the soft velveteen covering of the sofa her tapered fingers tightened.

"And you'll be going where," he asked, "to-morrow?"

"I don't know," she said. "I told you I don't know."

"Just wander on?"

"I suppose so."

He sighed.

"In a way, I'm glad you'll be out of London. I shouldn't be able to bear it, if I knew that by lifting the receiver of a telephone and repeating a certain number to the exchange I could hear your voice; if I knew that by driving my car back by a certain street I should be passing within six yards of you; if I knew that at any moment, by the caprice of chance, I might be meeting you in this restaurant or the other, in this

theatre or the other. You'd be too near to me, too tantalizingly near. It's better as it is."

"Perhaps," she said. Then, after a pause, "I'm tired, Graham. I think, if you don't mind, I'll go to bed. Wait half a second and I'll bring you out a blanket."

She rose from the sofa and, with knees that trembled a little, walked towards her bedroom door. His eyes followed her. The door opened. Her fingers pressed down the electric switch. For a moment against the lighted interior her figure was outlined in silhouette. There was a sound of rustled bedclothes. A moment's pause, then Gwen came back into the room carrying on her arm a blanket and a rug.

"Here you are," she said.

He took them from her and tossed them across the sofa. Through the shadowed half-light of the room her eyes were strangely bright; and her face whiter than he had ever seen it.

"Good night," she whispered.

But he could not let her go like that. For weeks, for months, for the rest of his life it might be, he would not be seeing her again. For on the morrow there would be the business of packing, the stress of catching trains. Never again, perhaps, would they be so alone together. At all costs this moment must be prolonged. When that door had once more closed behind her she would have passed out of his life for ever.

Awkwardly, and for want of anything else to say:

"I suppose you'll be going south," he said, "to-morrow?"

"That's the third time, Graham, in one way or another, that you've asked me the same thing."

"I know."

She smiled softly at him.

"You're tired—more tired probably even than I am. And I'm tired enough. Good night!" And she stretched out her hand to him.

But he took no notice of it.

"I'm so wretched," he said, "so immeasurably more wretched than ever I've been before. I can't bear the thought of saying good night to you, because it may be that it'll be good-bye, and I'll say any silly thing rather than see you go." And then suddenly his power over himself broke down. "Oh, Gwen, Gwen," he gasped, "I love you so!"

The sight at that moment of her loved face was more almost than he could endure. His arm raised across his eyes, he turned from her, staggered across the room, lurched up against the mantelpiece and buried his face against his hands in a desperate attempt to recover his control.

"I love you, I love you so," he muttered.

Before Gwen's eyes the room appeared to rock uncertainly. Through a mist she felt herself walking across the floor to Graham, through a mist saw herself laying her hands upon his shoulders, through a mist heard herself murmuring soft, consoling words.

"Don't, don't, you mustn't. I can't bear to see you unhappy. Don't, don't."

As the words fell from her lips, words softer than she had uttered for many years to any man, she felt little by little her strength deserting her.

"You mustn't, you mustn't," she went on whispering, and her cheek now was very close to his. Where she might have been able to resist passion, his unhappiness had unweaponed her.

He shook his head.

"You don't understand," he said unsteadily. "I've cared so much. And I've fought so hard to prevent your knowing that I cared. You wouldn't understand."

"Ah, but I do." Through a mist, against her will, the words were wrung from her. "Understand? How should you?"

His answer came like a retort, almost impatiently.

"I've fought so hard," he said, "I never knew that one could fight over anything so hard. Fought till I knew that I was beaten. Till I knew that there

was safety only in flight for me. When I realized that I was beaten, I went to my employers and asked if I could be sent abroad. The very day I went they had decided that I must remain permanently in London. That same week I sold your shares; sold them because I was afraid of meeting you. I didn't dare to see you again. How should you understand that, Gwen?"

"I can understand that very well, my dear. Understand it better even than you can. Because I can understand a person being even more afraid than you were."

"More afraid!" He repeated the words scornfully, incredulously.

"Yes, more afraid," she repeated bravely. "You sold the shares because you were afraid of the certainty of meeting me. I ran away from London because I couldn't face even the risk of meeting you."

. . . . . .

Her heart beating, her mouth dry, the rim of her eyes burning her, Gwen Lawrence sat before the mirror at her dressing-table. Her arms still ached from the harsh pressure of Graham's fingers, her lips still stung from the heat of Graham's kiss. What had been said, what had been done? To what was she committed? She was powerless now that Graham knew she loved him. As long as he had been able to believe that her feelings for him were simply those of friendship, he had had the courage to resist her. He had never set himself ardently to woo her, he had never said the things before which her strength would have been changed to weakness. And because he had never said those things, she had been able to retain her attitude of aloof composure. Now that he knew, now that they both knew, was there any power in the world to protect them from one another.

Mechanically she smoothed the soft cool cream across her face; mechanically she passed over her nails the long curved leather pad; mechanically she began to brush her hair, sweeping the fine stiff bristles through the short cropped hair. Mechanically she raised herself from her

chair, and began to draw her dress up from her waist in pleats before she lifted it above her head.

From the drawing-room she could hear the sounds of Graham's undressing. He was having difficulties apparently with the bed. The far side of the sofa would not, it seemed, let down. A sudden creak. Ah, that would be it then. Two heavier sounds one after the other. The chink of money. A metallic rattle. His braces probably. A rustle or two of linen, then silence. Slowly she dropped her silk nightdress over her head, slowly slipped off beneath it her thin silk camisole, and seating herself on the edge of the bed, began to pull off her stockings.

How still it was. Not a sound of any description in the immense sleeping house. All those floors and corridors and rooms, and themselves perhaps the only two waking persons in it; and between themselves that narrow partition of matchwood only. Was he asleep, she wondered. Silently with straining ears she listened. Was he so tired that sleep had come to him the moment his body had found itself upon the tolerable discomfort of the hotel cushions, or was he awake as she, with beating heart and dry mouth and straining ears?

Was that a sound? In a second she was sitting bolt upright in bed. Had she heard, or was it merely fancy, the rustle of a blanket slipping to the floor? Rigid in every nerve, not daring to breathe, her fingers clutching tightly to the sheets, she sat there listening. For minutes it seemed, she waited. Again what was it? Was that the creaking of a board, or fancy, or her own heart's beating? She could hear nothing, not the sound of breathing even. But though neither through her eyes nor through her ears could the sense of his presence be conveyed to her, she knew as clearly as though she could see and hear him, that Graham Moreton was standing close up against that narrow partition of painted wood, his heart thudding against his side, his tongue dry within his mouth, his fingers raised towards the handle of the door.

She did not stir. Perfectly rigid, with closed eyes and straining ears, she waited: waited till with that same inner sense that could transcend the power of sight and sound, she knew that on noiseless feet Graham Moreton was creeping back to the sofa across the floor. Then limp suddenly, the tension loosened, she sank back into her bed, and a pillow pressed against her mouth stifled as best she might the surging flood of sobs.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE COST OF LOVING

"MR. STIRLING rang you up, sir," the maid informed Graham on his return, dusty and tired, some twenty hours later, to his parents' home. "He is giving a party this evening at his studio. He hoped that you and Miss Faversham might be able to come."

A party at Christopher's; how quickly one got back into it. That old life of formality and routine, of parties and dances and engagements.

Already the incidents of the last thirty-six hours had come to belong seemingly to another century, another period of time. The conversation over the telephone with Humphrey, the rush to Croydon, the argument at the aerodrome, the perilous passage of the taxi, the meeting at the Gare du Nord, the conversation in the small café off the second street, and after it that ecstatic tear-stained evening, the untasted dinner, the poetry of the bois, the raucous vitality of the Concert Mayol, the cabaret of the Moulin d'Or, the drive back to the hotel through the chill and emptying streets, and afterwards their talk together in the twilit drawing-room.

Those twenty or thirty minutes; whatever else of ecstasy life in the course of its fifty odd years of traffic with him might hold in store, nothing surely could be comparable with the rapture of that moment, when for the first time he had felt under his the parted softness of her lips. The wonder of it, the surprise, the marvel.

One could not, whatever came to one, feel that way twice.

Confusedly Graham recalled the incidents of that hurried morning, the long silence at breakfast, the pervading sense of an irrevocable decision.

"But we are going to be together now," he had pleaded. "Whatever happens to either of us, we shall be together. Things are not perhaps as we would have had them be, but as they are, because we so love each other, we will accept them on their terms, as they cannot be had on ours."

She had nodded her head.

"Very well," she had said, "if you wish it so."

"And you will come back to London at once," he had persisted.

For a moment she had hesitated, then suddenly had shrugged her shoulders.

"Very well," she had said. "Sooner or later it has to be. It might just as well be sooner. I had better buy a dress and hat or so whilst I am here, but I will be back by Friday afternoon."

"As soon as that."

"Oh yes, I shall fly over probably. No woman can be expected to cross the Channel twice by sea in fifty hours."

And so they had left it there, left there the decision of how they were to arrange and manipulate the conduct of such a life as they were to decide upon. This only had been agreed, their lives, whatever was to happen, were to be one. It had not in so many actual words been said, but in every word and gesture it had been implied.

"We will decide how we are to manage things," she had said. If only though, things could have been a little otherwise. If only the prelude to their love had not to be the treacherous betrayal of an old one.

For he still loved Joan, from that certainty there was no appeal. Though this passion of his for Gwen was stronger than anything he had ever felt before, was

stronger than anything he had imagined himself to be capable of feeling, there was, he knew, a certain side of himself that no one but Joan could touch, and that no one but Joan would ever touch again. There are certain things that can only be said once. Certain things that can only be believed in once, certain dreams that are not for renewal, and there were some things that he had given Joan that he could never give to anyone else. They would have been happy enough together if Gwen Lawrence had never come into their lives. He was not in the position of one who turns with relief from a love that has begun to irk him, that is glad of any excuse to be rid of an embarrassing situation. He was not like that. He would miss Joan profoundly all through the years. He knew that well enough.

She must be at home by now. As she had not been on the same boat as himself she must have followed and caught the earlier train from Paris. As soon as possible she must be seen, and what had to be said between themselves, said.

Without waiting to take off his coat he went straight to the library to telephone. Impatiently he waited for the number. There was a long pause before the maid's voice answered him.

"Yes, this is Mr. Eric Faversham's house."

"I want to speak to Miss Joan Faversham."

"She is not back yet, sir, I am afraid."

"What?"

"She is catching the late boat. We have just had a wire through from Paris. She won't arrive till midnight."

"Oh! Well tell her, anyhow, that Mr. Graham Moreton rang up and that he will be ringing up again to-morrow."

"Very good, sir."

Not back till midnight; for another twenty-four hours he would have to carry the weight of his confession. He would have to go to the office in the

morning, he could not possibly see her before the evening, and by four o'clock Gwen would be again in London.

He would go and see Joan, he decided, after dinner. It would be easier; he would feel braver if he had seen Gwen Lawrence first.

Twenty-four hours, though, twenty-four hours of strain and turmoil, and restless, unsleeping agitation.

In the hall below came the loud boom of the first dinner bell. In half an hour he would be seated between his parents. The evening's placid interchange of comment and information and opinions would have begun. Slowly the interminable hours would pursue their course. Three hours from eight o'clock till eleven. Three hours of it, with twenty-one hours at the end of it to be lived through still.

He could not. No, quite frankly he could not face it. Better go out. Better a party, better anything than that. A party at Christopher's; he had not been there since that Sunday, six months back, when the first tangles of his complication had been made, and perhaps it was fitting now that the ravelling and unravelling were complete, for him to make this second and last visit there.

Twenty-four hours: well, and he might kill four of them that way.

The party had been in progress some forty minutes when he arrived, and the studio was crowded with noise and animation. On the long buffet table which spanned the extremity of the room, bottle after bottle of champagne, like a row of soldiers on parade, was cooling in its bucket of crushed ice. About them and between them on cut glass dishes were high piled banks of cakes and sandwiches. In the corner that was remotest, an ancient white-aproned servitor was churning with a swizzle stick, the contents of a wide-necked jug, into a pale pink foam.

In the centre of the room Christopher was welcoming his guests.

"Ah, here's Sybyl Marchant," he was saying as Graham waited beside the butler to be announced. "I was half afraid," he added, "that after our last meeting——" and his eyelids flickered interrogatvely.

"I decided," said Sybyl Marchant, "to allow you an opportunity to apologize."

"And I shall be delighted to have an opportunity to explain."

With a smile she turned to Geoffrey Brackenridge.

"I wonder," she said, "if that's enough."

"From Christopher, I think."

"And it will be a good explanation."

There was a slightly sinister intonation in his voice which made Sybyl Marchant look quickly, and a little anxiously at him. At her side Robinson was hesitating.

"Miss Mildred Atkinson," he announced.

"Humphrey has got a headache," she was saying, "so I have come by myself. "You don't mind, I hope?"

"Had you not come," said Christopher, "this party so far as I am concerned would have been a failure. Let's see now who we can find to entertain you. Graham Moreton, perhaps?"

She shook her head. He was young and unestablished, with a fiancée somewhere. Moreover, she had detected across the crowded room Lord Heresy's ponderous figure.

"Don't you bother about me," she said. "This person can look after number one," and walking across towards the buffet table, she leant there waiting for Lord Heresy to recognize her.

She had not long to wait, and a swift reassuring glow of triumph warmed her, as she noticed the shock of surprised delight that illumined suddenly those massive features.

She smiled to herself as she watched his laboured effort to extricate himself from the group to which he had become attached. Slowly he manœuvred his way

towards her. Her arms stretched sideways along the table, the white curve of her throat flung back, her brown eyes smiled up at him.

"Well," she said.

His face was flushed with an inarticulate eagerness.

"Good to see you again."

"It was a nice surprise for me, too, Lord Heresy."

"Always seem to run up against you when you are in a crowd."

"I am not in a crowd now."

Cool and calm and self-assured, she watched the flush of excitement deepen on his face. Humphrey could ignore her if he chose, but there were other men who did not. A headache indeed. As though she did not know that excuse. She knew those headaches. It might be another woman, or it might not, anyhow there was something that he would rather do than take her to a party; and the moment one found oneself not coming first with a man, it was high time to begin looking round.

The dark pupils in Lord Heresy's eyes widened and grew more tense. Never had she felt more certain of herself, of her power to imperil and enslave.

"All these people though," he said.

She shrugged her shoulders enigmatically.

"Suppose," he said, "there is no chance ever of seeing you by yourself?"

"There are twenty-four hours to every day."

"If I were to come round one morning in my car, I might persuade you to come out for lunch?"

"If you give me sufficient warning."

"If I were to come on Monday, say?"

"I expect you would find me in."

He hesitated; his eyes were bright and the blue vein was throbbing in his temple.

"And you would not be in too much of a hurry afterwards to run away?"

"Not," she laughed, "if you made yourself sufficiently amusing."

Brightly, stridently, the swell of innumerable contacts and conversations ebbed and swayed. As the number of empty bottles gathered behind the stretch of table-cloth, and the high pile of sandwiches diminished, the volume of sound increased. The air was growing heated and smoke-ladened. The long-haired Italian was strumming upon a banjo, a few couples were attempting, not too successfully, to dance; someone was suggesting an organization of an impromptu glee party.

It was a successful party. One of the fifty-and-nine such other parties as were being staged every night of the week and year, in the large cities of our contemporary Cosmopotis. Paris, Vienna, London, New York, Berlin, they all look the same, they all are the same. The same people, wearing the same clothes, drinking the same champagne, eating the same highly-spiced savoury sandwiches, saying the same things, thinking the same things, living the same lives, the expressions every one of them from their different continents and different countries of similar conditions.

There was nothing to distinguish this party of Christopher's from those other fifty-and-nine such parties. On the surface, that is to say. For beneath the surface, to certain individuals of that party, were certain associations and ideas inseparable from it, making it for a time separate and distinct.

As Graham Moreton leant back against the wall listening with half of his attention to an animated discussion on the probable composition of the Welsh three-quarter line, there rose vividly before his eyes a picture of this studio as he had last seen it, on that morning in early March when the faint apricot sunlight had been spread so caressingly on a world stirring with new life.

How happy he had been as he had driven through the park with Joan. How little he had suspected the chain of circumstances to which he was to see that drive subsequently as a prelude; how simply, how inevitably

one thing had followed on another. The meeting with Gwen, his visit to her flat, the purchase of the shares, the reiterated opportunities of meeting her. One thing led so simply to another. He had not meant to behave shabbily, he had done his best to get clear of things; he had applied to be sent abroad. He had sold the shares on his own responsibility. He had done his best to get Gwen Lawrence out of his life completely. He had not meant to behave shabbily, not that he supposed anyone ever did. Things happened, and one had got to make the best of them. If he had met Gwen first, or if Joan had not . . . how was he to have known at the start that it would have been possible for him to love anyone more than Joan, or rather that it would have been possible for him to love anyone differently, for it was differently no more. It was in a different way that he loved Gwen, it was not that he did not love Joan any longer, it was that . . . Ah! but what was the good of going over it? Things had happened and there it was. Standing here at the end he could do no more than see how the long path had curved down from that quiet opening.

In much the same way that Mildred Atkinson, seated beside Lord Heresy on the vast, low, many-cushioned divan, for all that she was practical and unsentimental, could not help remembering the first time that she had sat there. Then, as now, she had been on the brink of a decision. A decision as profoundly significant as that other one had been.

This time she was managing things better, though. In her inexperience she had made a number of extremely elementary mistakes. To have taken a flat, for instance, with no maid's bedroom. It had been an incredible inconvenience. She had known so little, and she had imagined that a charwoman in the mornings was to be sufficient. She had never conceived what innumerable difficulties would be caused by people calling at times when she was not in a condition to receive them. Either she had to be dressed twenty minutes before she

expected to be called for, or receive her guests in her dressing-gown.

Humphrey should have known. But when she had explained things to him, he had merely shrugged his shoulders and said that he was sorry but that there was no spare room there for a maid. She had not cared to make the suggestion of another flat. By the time she had realized how much she needed one, a new flat, three times as large, with a dining-room as well as a drawing-room, and a largish hall, a flat that she would be able to furnish in the light of her new ideas, she had realized it was useless to ask Humphrey for one. Five months back she might, but she had been only too conscious, during the last few weeks, that her hold on him was less strong than it had been. He had come less frequently to see her; he made love to her not only less ardently, but rather casually, in the spirit of: "Well, as I'm here, we might as well." And then there had been Henry. She had been a fool to go with him that Sunday to Epping Forest, a worse fool still to give him her address. Sooner or later he and Humphrey would have been bound to meet, and though Humphrey had said nothing she had known he was suspicious.

That mistake, anyhow, she would not make again; as she had learnt from this first experiment how to arrange the furniture of a flat, so she had learnt to arrange the furniture of her life.

There would be no Henrys another time, and if she could not keep an old man as long as it pleased her to . . .

That earlier party of Christopher's was in the mind also of Sybyl Marchant, as she pondered the exact significance of Christopher's promise to explain, not to apologize, for his behaviour the previous week. From the very first she had felt slightly suspicious of Christopher, not in any way because she disliked him, but because she felt he understood her far too well. From the very first he had guessed the manner of game she

was playing, and she had yet to discover whether he was to be her enemy or her friend; a state of ignorance in which she felt she could afford to remain no longer.

As soon as was possible, without a breach of manners or diplomacy, she disembarrassed herself of Geoffrey's company to seek out her host.

"I have come," she said, "for my explanation."

"You want it, really?"

"If you please."

For answer he drew a letter from his pocket and handed it to her.

"I received that yesterday," he said.

It was from a firm of typewriting and shorthand agents.

"DEAR SIR" (it ran), "A few weeks ago you were asking whether it would be possible for us to send out occasional stenographers, and we had regretfully to inform you that the size of our business did not permit of such facilities. We have, however, in the course of the last week, taken over the Marchant Agency, of whose activities you may perhaps have heard. This agency controls a number of highly-trained and efficient stenographers, and should you ever again find yourself in need of one, we are happy to be in the position to state that we shall be able to accommodate you at the shortest notice.

"Faithfully yours,
"JONES & CUMBAFORLD, LTD."

"The Marchant Agency," he said, "was, I believe, yourself?"

She nodded her head.

"I called on them to-day," he told her.

"That must have been nice for you," she replied. "They're pleasant people."

"They told me that you had been their most dangerous competitor."

"That was generous of them."

"They paid, they told me, three thousand for the Marchant Agency."

The smile did not leave her lips.

"You were correctly informed," she said, "they did."

"They wondered why, when the business was in so flourishing a condition, you had sold it."

"You wondered less, however."

"I was sufficiently curious to pay a visit to your former rooms and have a talk with your old landlady, Mrs. Smith."

"A good woman. I liked her."

"She liked you. She told me that she liked having a person like yourself, who was always going to parties and amusements," Chris answered. "A bit of sunshine about the place was the phrase, I think. She seemed to have no objections to late hours. She said she was very sorry when you went."

"That was nice of her. And how nice of you to come and tell me. One's friends usually only tell one the unpleasant things. And is that all?"

Her calm after the hysteria of the earlier meeting was slightly a surprise to him.

"Not entirely," he answered.

"No?"

"There are one or two things I would rather like to ask you."

She bent her head forward graciously, in acquiescence.

"If I can answer them," she said, "I will."

"I wanted to ask you how many of the times that you told Geoffrey that you were going to theatres and dances, you really did go out."

She smiled at that.

"Not so very often," she replied.

"And those evenings when he used to ring you up, to find out the exact moment you got back?"

"Ah, those evenings!" and she raised her hands with a gesture of recollective horror. "I think, my

dear, those were the most awful evenings of my life."

"You were in the flat then, the whole time?"

"The whole time, trying to read with that appalling bell going every fifteen minutes. You can't think what it was like. But I wasn't going to answer it. I wasn't going to give way. The sleepier I got and the more my head began to ache, the more pleasant it was to think of Geoffrey fretting himself into a fury of jealousy. I've felt so angry sometimes that I've kept him waiting as late as five o'clock. For six consecutive hours I have sat there, with my eyelids growing heavier and heavier, and my headache getting worse, and that bell going all the time. And then, at last, when I thought that I could decently sound 'cease fire,' I would run round and round the table so as to get myself out of breath, so that when at last I should answer the telephone my voice would be breathless and exhausted and excited, as it is when one comes back after a long night's dancing, and I would chatter away about the wonderful evening I had had. Wonderful food; wonderful music; wonderful partners. And he would always make the same answer. 'I've been out, too,' he'd say. 'I've just got back. I thought you'd be getting in at about this time, and that I'd ring you up to say good-night.'

"And I'd always make the same reply: 'And suppose,' I'd say, 'that I had got back at three and you'd woken me up after two hours' sleep?' And he would laugh and, 'Wait till I've done it,' he would say.

"Oh, yes, Christopher," she concluded, "there's been a good deal of dramatic irony in my life during the last few months."

"And it was only just to frighten him?" he asked.

She nodded.

"To frighten him, and in a way, too, I suppose, to punish him."

"Punish him? But what for?"

"What for? Oh, well, I don't know. For

imagining, perhaps, that I was to be got as easily as in the beginning he thought I was. I suppose," she added, "you'll not be going to tell Geoffrey this?"

Christopher shook his head.

"I mind my own business," he replied.

She smiled.

"I'm glad of that," she said. "It would be a pity if he didn't marry me."

"Marry you?"

"Are you surprised? But surely, my dear, you don't imagine that I should have wasted all this time on him unless I had meant to marry him?"

Christopher shrugged his shoulders.

"I should have scarcely thought," he said, "that Geoffrey was a very attractive proposition for a woman who held that material pleasures were the only ones that mattered."

"Oh, that?" she laughed. "So I took you in too! I believe, you see, in fighting people on their own ground, especially on a ground like that. From the very beginning he was beaten. It's absurd to talk materialism to a woman on less than six thousand pounds a year!"

"Then you're in love with him?"

Again she laughed.

"I'd rather be a wife than a stenographer."

"And when are you expecting to become one?"

"As soon, I suppose, as he has the common sense to realize that it's cheaper to run one establishment than two!"

The party was drawing to a close, Geoffrey had gone, and Sybyl and Mildred and the Heresys. The room was wearing that depressed, draggled look that rooms do wear, when a party is about to end. The air was stale with tobacco smoke, the fireplace littered with cigarette ends; on book-cases and cabinets empty glasses were ranged in disorderly rows. The white table-cloth was stained and spotted; the plates looked,

arranged along it, dirty with crumbled cake and the remains of trifles.

Christopher had ceased for half an hour to protest at his friends' departure. It was no longer, "Oh, but surely must you," it was, "How charming of you to come."

It was time, Graham realized, for him to go himself. His head was heavy, his eyelids were rimmed with fire; five out of the twenty-four hours had been killed; it was close on two o'clock. Long since the day had started, the day that as long as he lived it would be stamped indelibly on his memory. The day of shame and triumph, which would see victory won only with the sword of perfidy.

Slowly he lifted himself up from his chair, to cast, before he said good-bye, one last look round the studio to which he would not be able to return. This door like so many others would be shut on him. He would have to find new friends for his new life.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SETTLING OF ACCOUNTS

WITH a sigh of boredom, Christopher Stirling laid aside his paper on the following morning. Really, but how dull newspapers became when the cricket season was over. It was not that in itself cricket particularly thrilled him. He went to the Eton and Harrow match, of course, but chiefly to see his friends. Of the five or so hours that he would pass there, four at least would be spent in sauntering slowly between the new stand and the practice ground. Neither as a spectacle nor as a pursuit did the game excite him. But as literature it added considerably to the sum of his life's enjoyment. Each issue of the evening papers contained some definitely fresh news, and every morning there was the little thrill of seeing whether in a fading light and on a crumbling wicket the Worcester rabbits had been able to play out time against Parkin and Macdonald.

In the winter months there was little to be read of in the morning papers that one had not heard about the night before. And was there any period of the year more barren of possibilities than the last weeks of September? The little season had not begun. Everyone was out of London; there was not a single invitation card along the wide length of his bedroom mantelpiece. And his diary, so black usually with engagements, was less than parti-coloured. Emptily the days stretched out in front of one.

"How nice it would be, Robinson," he remarked

as his patient servitor came into the room to remove the breakfast tray, "how nice it would be if we had an office to go to on such days, with letters to dictate and contracts to adjust. We should be so effective, too. Can you not see us in a few years' time becoming, out of sheer boredom, Napoleons of high finance? You smile, Robinson. Ah, well, you are free to. Unlikelier things have happened."

At that moment and with extreme violence the telephone bell began to ring. The apparatus was within a few inches of Christopher's hand. But he left the answering of the call to his servant.

"See who it is, Robinson," he said.

With pontifical solemnity Robinson lowered the breakfast tray on to the chest of drawers.

"This is Mayfair 53173," he announced; "it is the house of Mr. Christopher Stirling." He listened for a moment with the receiver pressed close against his ear. Then, holding the mouthpiece firmly to his shoulder, he turned. "Miss Joan Faversham, sir, would like to speak to you."

A flush of eager pleasure coloured the pale mask of Christopher's features.

"Oh, but how nice. Hand me the thing over. Really, Joan," he went on, "this is a delightful surprise. I was just thinking how dull I was going to find everything to-day."

There was a toneless apathy in the voice that answered him.

"I want to see you, Chris," it said. "When can I?"

"My time, whatever other disposals I might have made of it, would be yours. I do, however, happen to be completely free to-day. Wouldn't it be a rather good idea for us to take some lunch together?"

"Lunch? That's such a long way off."

"Only three hours."

"Three hours. Still, oh very well then, I'll lunch with you. Where?"

"Ritz Grill. One-twenty."

"Right." And from the other end came the click of a replaced receiver.

"A not particularly gracious way of accepting a not ungenerous invitation," was Christopher's private comment. "However——"

And raising himself among the pillows, he began to prepare for the business of self-arrayal.

Early in life Christopher Stirling had realized that it is part of a host's duty to reach a restaurant five minutes before the earliest of his guests. A realization that in these unpunctual days had cost him many vacant hours in hall and lobby. He was to discover, however, as he walked at a quarter-past one down the long corridor between the grill-room and the stairs, that Joan Faversham was already waiting for him in the many-mirrored lounge.

"I'll not apologize," he said; "we're both unpunctual. How jolly it is to see you."

But he had only to take one glance at the crumpled figure in the high-backed green armchair to realize that jolly was the last word with which to describe this particular occasion. There was not in her face nor in her figure's poise the least sign of animation as she rose to greet him.

Trouble, he thought. And genuine this time, not imagined trouble. And a quick spasm of irritation shook him against the man who was responsible for the drawn lines about the mouth that had been fashioned for laughter only.

The grill-room was fairly full, but Joan did not, as she took the chair that the waiter was holding back for her, bother to glance round to see if at any of the other tables there was anyone she knew. Nor did she pay any real attention to the ordering of the lunch.

"That will be very nice," she said. But Christopher knew very well that she would be unable to remember a single dish of the three or four that he had suggested.

"You don't mind if I smoke?" she asked. But

she had no sooner lit her cigarette than she had stubbed it impatiently into the small brass tray beside her. She allowed a very admirable *bisque d'homard* to be taken away half touched, and did little more than break with her fork the smooth white surface of a *sole bonne femme;* while in an attempt to put her at her ease, and to allow her pause to collect her courage to say what she had to say, Stirling maintained a rippling fusillade of facetious soliloquy.

"You've only been back an hour or two, so you won't have heard the delightful story about Mrs. Rogerdale at the Cornets' party. It's too charming. I must tell you," and all the time he was watching closely, waiting for the confession that sooner or later he knew must come. It came, as he had expected, suddenly, and right across one of his most entertaining anecdotes.

"Chris," she said abruptly, "I have decided to break off my engagement."

Christopher raised his eyebrows.

"So?" he said, and waited.

Then in a rush the confession came. She told him of Graham's appointment of which he had not told her.

"For two years," she said, "we've been waiting for that; for that and only that. And then, when it comes, he doesn't tell me. There can be one explanation only. He doesn't love me any longer. He doesn't want to marry me."

Christopher Stirling pouted.

"Don't you think that there's a chance of his having wanted to keep it as a surprise for you? When was it I told you of it?"

"A couple of days before we went abroad."

"A couple of days? Well, there you are. He knew you'd be going away soon. He didn't think you'd be likely to hear the news from anyone. And it was rather a fluke, you know, that you should have heard it. He meant to keep it as a more complete surprise for you when you came back. You've only been back an hour

or so. You may find that he's got a special licence and a flat already furnished."

He spoke jokingly enough, in a desperate attempt to reassure her. But his own heart was heavy; remembering what he had learnt from Humphrey and Gwen Lawrence.

She shook her head.

"That's what I tried to think; that's what I managed to console myself with for a little. I almost came to believe in it, in fact, But I can't any longer now. Two nights ago I saw Graham in Paris. And Mrs. Lawrence was there with him."

She paused. About them was the stir of talk, the rattle of plates, the scurrying of waiters. But for those two at their table beneath the flowered platform the world of colour and animation was without existence.

"Well?" she asked at length.

He did not reply immediately. And when he did reply it was with another question.

"I suppose," he said, "that in spite of this you love him as much as you ever did?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't see that that has much to do with it."

"Ah, but it has! Before you chuck a thing away it's as well to find out first whether you value it or not."

"Whether I value it or not?" she retorted scornfully. "I'm not going to let a man, however much I may want him, take me out of charity, because he thinks he owes it me, or because he can't get somebody else that he wants more."

"I see." There was another pause, and then in a slow, quiet, infinitely persuasive voice Christopher began to speak to her. "You asked me," he said, "what that question had to do with it, and though I can see very well your point about not letting yourself be a second best for any man, I'm not sure that it isn't out of false pride that you are deciding now to break off your engagement. For you see, Joan dear, there comes a time

in every woman's life when she has got to fight to keep the man she loves. It comes usually, I suppose, four or five years after marriage, but because your engagement has been so long it has come in your case before instead of after. And when that moment comes to a woman I believe there are only two questions that she can put to herself: 'Do I still want him?' and 'Is he worth fighting for?' And if she does, and he is, I think the woman should decide to fight."

"But if he doesn't love her any longer?"

"How is she to tell he doesn't? And how is she to tell that she may not win him back? Can one ever enter into the mind of another person? Is it possible for a woman to know how or why her man is being attracted by this other woman? How can you know how much or how little, if she means anything at all, Mrs. Lawrence matters to Graham? She's worrying him, we'll allow that; they've been seen in Paris together. If it is a grand passion, life'll decide that for itself. Grand passions, luckily for the comfort of the world, come rarely, and not everybody is capable of them. This may be one, but it much more likely isn't. And if it's just one of those fleeting things, those gnats of fugitive attraction that most of us at one time or another succumb to, if it's that, then if you want him, you'll get Graham back again. For myself, I think he's worth it."

"But if this sort of thing's going to happen," she protested, "before we're married——"

"As likely as not," he caught her up, "you won't be worried by it afterwards. You'll be inoculated. I said that such a moment comes in the life of nearly every woman. But seldom twice. If you value a thing, that thing is worth fighting for. It's undignified to fight for a man that's not worth fighting for. But Graham is. I beseech you, don't break off this engagement."

"Then what am I to do?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" she echoed.

"That's the advantage," he explained, "of the official position of wife or of fiancée. She hasn't to do anything. If anything has to be done, it's the man that has to do it. If you force a decision on Graham; if you say to him, 'You're to choose now and for all time between this woman and myself,' in the tumult that he's in now, he might choose Mrs. Lawrence. But if you don't force that decision on him, if you pretend that nothing has happened, that nothing is happening, rather than come to a decision of his own accord, he will let the situation continue till the other affair has died, as such affairs invariably do die, of its own accord. I don't know," he concluded, "if you'll think all this very cynical and worldly-wise. But it's the only way if you want to be sure of keeping him."

With her face averted, her hands clasped across the table, Joan Faversham had listened. As he finished, she nodded her head slowly.

"I don't like it," she said. "I won't promise anything. But for a week or so I'll let things go."

"And if he comes back to you," Stirling insisted, "whatever you do, don't ask any questions."

"And now," murmured Christopher, as he walked some twenty minutes later beside her into Piccadilly, "and now for Mrs. Lawrence."

. . . . . .

No 17A Ciber Crescent was in such a condition of disorder as may be expected of flats to which its owners make an unheralded return. Pictures were piled on beds and tables. Windows were curtainless. Grates untended, and over all was a pervading and pungent smell of carbolic soap. Gloomily, with the dust and heat of a five-hours' journey on her, Gwen Lawrence surveyed the chaos. Against the clock on the drawing-room mantelpiece was leaning the orange envelope of a telegram.

"Open it, May, will you," she said, "and tell me what's inside it?"

"Someone signing themselves Graham will be calling between six and seven."

"Between six and seven, and it's now three. How we shall ever get this place straight first—and I'm filthy and exhausted. You might put on a hot bath for me."

The water had scarcely been turned on, however, before the front door bell rang.

"Tell whomever it is I'm out," she said impatiently. But on hearing in the passage Christopher Stirling's languid voice, she changed her mind.

"Here I am, Chris," she called out. "I didn't know it was you. Not, as you'll see, that there's anywhere for you to sit, my dear. I've come back earlier than was expected."

"And was Paris nice?" he asked.

"Paris? How did you know that I had been in Paris?"

"A person, my dear Gwen, with as many acquaintances as you have can scarcely expect to go anywhere incognita."

Intently and suspiciously she looked at him.

"I see," she said. Then raising her voice: "You can turn that bath off, May. I shan't be wanting it for half an hour or so.

"And now, Chris," she said, "we'll take some of those pictures off the chesterfield and you shall tell me exactly what Joan Faversham's been saying to you."

The quickness with which she had recognized the source of his information did not noticeably embarrass him.

"It's not so much what Joan Faversham's been saying," he laughed. "I was wondering what you and Graham were going to do about it."

She raised her eyebrows.

"Do about it? What is there to be done?"

"Well, I don't suppose you're thinking of getting married are you?"

"I should have to get unmarried first."

"And that?"

"For obvious reasons scarcely possible. I should have to refind my husband first. I wouldn't naturally allow myself to be divorced. And if I divorced him I shouldn't be able to see Graham for over a year. Oh, no, Chris; this is not one of the problems into which marriage enters."

"Then what'll happen?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"What usually does happen on such occasions."

"And you'll live on what?"

"I don't seem to manage too badly now."

"Perhaps, but then Graham wouldn't stand for this."

Again that distrustful look came into her eyes. She tossed back her head impatiently.

"I wish you wouldn't bother me," she said. "I'm tired."

"You couldn't afford," he persisted, "to go on living here."

"Well?" and the word was a snarl almost.

"You couldn't afford to go on living here, and do you think you'll find it easy, after the sort of life you've led for the last four years, to start going to an office, catching an early train, lunching at a Lyons and wearing imitation silk? For that's what it would come to. Graham's got no money. And there are a lot of women looking for jobs just now. You'd be lucky if you got anyone to give you four pounds a week. Three ten would be nearer it."

Her eyes were angry now, and her mouth was set.

"I don't care," she said, "it's worth it. I want Graham, and when I want a thing, I get it."

"And how long will you go on wanting him?"

"Does that matter? When I've stopped wanting him, I'll go."

"And Graham?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"A man can fend for himself," she said. "Anyhow, by the time I've stopped wanting him, he'll

probably have stopped wanting me. So you needn't worry about us, my dear. I'm not leading the poor boy up the garden. I'm not entrapping him into marriage."

"But do you realize into what you do happen to be leading him?"

He spoke very quietly, very persuasively, affectionately almost. And the look of anger and distrust receded in the amber-coloured eyes.

"What do you mean?" she said.

"I mean," he answered, "that you don't, I think, quite realize what'll happen. People when they are in love with one another rarely do. But we others who stand outside can see more or less where the road is curving. We remember how other roads have curved. And though you'll say, I know, that your road is different from any other road, it usually turns out that all these roads, from wherever they may start, lead eventually to the same waste places."

"And where, Chris, is this road leading?"

He paused before answering her. She was seated upon the table, her hands resting on the side, and, stretching out his hand towards her, he took in his the slim, cool, unresisting fingers.

"I think," he said quietly, "that this, more or less, is what'll happen. He'll ask you to give up all your friends, the friends that are useful to you, and because you are in love with him, you will. When those friends go, the greater part of this comfort will go with them. You'll have to pay then for all your meals. You'll probably sell this flat and invest the money that you get from it. You'll find your dresses wearing out and you won't have the money to buy such good new ones. At first it may be that you won't mind. One doesn't mind those things when one's in love. Later on, though, when one's a little less in love . . . however, we can let that pass. There are other things that have got to happen first. Graham's quarrel, for one thing, with his parents. For they will quarrel with

him, I know that. As long as he leads a life of which they do not approve, they will not allow him to live with them."

"And what if they do?" she interrupted him. "It's no new thing for a son to quarrel with his parents."

"Perhaps not, but it'll mean Graham taking lodgings somewhere, or a flat, and it'll mean that later on, when money's scarce, you and he'll begin asking each other whether it isn't cheaper to run one establishment than two. And because you'll be still in love with one another you'll say that prudence doesn't matter, that nothing matters except that the setting should be made as easy for that love as possible. And you don't need my telling you where that road would lead to."

Her hand still held in his, she listened wearily.

"Go on," she said.

"You've got enough examples surely in life and literature of what that leads to. You'll find in that way of living all the disadvantages and none of the advantages of marriage, and the more you begin to jar on one another's nerves, the more you'll find yourself remembering the ease and freedom and the luxury of the life you used to know. For one needs those things, when love has begun to pass. Those last months together won't be particularly amusing."

"There'll have been those other months first, Chris," she protested. "Oh, I know I'll have to pay for them; one must always pay for anything worth having. But they'll be worth it. I shan't regret it. I'm not a coward. I shan't whimper when the time comes to pay."

"I wonder, though, if Graham will?"

"Graham, but why should he more than I?"

Stirling did not answer her directly.

"What'll you do, do you imagine, when it's over?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I shall come back and let all these poor fools start amusing me again."

"Come back, in fact, to where you are to-day?"

She nodded.

"I suppose so."

"But Graham won't be able to."

She started at that.

"Don't you realize, my dear," he said, "that you'll smash Graham pretty well for good?"

It was the argument to which everything else that he had said had served as a preliminary. It was the one argument he knew that would carry any weight with her. For her own safety and her own position she cared as little as any woman that is in love does care. He had not attempted to appeal to her instinct of self-preservation. He had not attempted to appeal to any feelings of pity she might have for Joan. She was as indifferent to Joan's unhappiness or happiness as a woman in love must always be towards her rival's welfare. It was through Graham alone that he could win this fight that he was waging on Joan's behalf.

"Don't you realize," he repeated, "that a young man with his way to make has to be as careful of his reputation, if in a different way, as any woman. People may not expect him to be innocent, but they do demand that he shall be discreet. He must have a clean background. He must be without entanglements—obvious ones, anyhow. He must be able to go to the right places and meet the right people. His firm regard him as a social representative, and if he is not sociably presentable they won't have any particular use for him. There are so many other young men who are: so many more young men than there are jobs for them. Graham has a future for himself where he is. But he wouldn't find it easy at his age to begin again. He'd be out of the race by the time you'd done with him, and things move so quickly nowadays that if you once get out of the race you stay out of it. He'd be finished, Gwen."

There was a silence when he ended. Slowly Gwen Lawrence lifted herself from the table, walked

over to the mantelpiece, and, leaning her arms along it, rested her head on them.

"That's true, is it?" she said in a half-stifled voice. "You are telling me the truth? I should smash him, should I—if—if I were to let him love me?"

"The risk is pretty big."

"I see." Again there was a silence, and again in that half-stifled voice: "It's rather cruel, you know," she said quietly. "For so many years now there's been this pack of men about me, any one of whom I could have loved so easily, with such impunity, and I haven't cared twopence for any of them. And then at last when the man comes . . . it's rather cruel not to be able to."

There was a pause: then slowly she turned round to face him.

"And you can't think, Chris," she said, "how tired of all this I am. How heavy it grows, this armour of caution and deceit. You can't think how I've longed to fling it down; to be myself; to release myself: to give, and give, and give instead of this perpetual taking. And then when at last the one man comes to whom I could give . . . not to be able to, Chris. For I can't, you know, if what you say is true."

Steadily he looked into her eyes, and there was that in them that made him strangely humble.

. . . . . .

By half-past six the flat had been restored to a superficial condition, at least, of order. In the armchair beside the fireplace Gwen Lawrence sat watching the smoke of her cigarette curl upwards to the ceiling. "I must be firm," she told herself. "I must make it quite clear to him how impossible any love must be between us. I will explain to him and he will go away. I shall learn, I suppose, to forget in time. If one does enough and goes about, one hasn't the time to think of things. I will explain to him, and he will go away."

But the moment he was in the room before her she knew that it was not by way of explanation that safety lay. Her heart had bounded horribly when she heard the clatter of the knock upon the door. Shakily she had risen to her feet; a mist was before her eyes. She had not the strength any longer to resist him. She couldn't argue when she cared so much. He would not listen to argument. He would take her in his arms, his lips would be on hers, and nothing else in the world would matter.

And as she stood swaying before the mantelpiece the memory came to her of a London play-actor, a certain Garrick, who, loving a girl to whom his love would only bring unhappiness, being unable to cure himself of his love for her, had saved her by the curing of her love for him, by the proving of himself unworthy of her love.

"Ah, Graham," she said jauntily, "so you see I'm back."

His face was eager and his eyes were bright. On his lips trembled the words of protestation, the words that on no account he must be allowed to utter.

"Well, here we are back," she laughed, "and now we can sit down quietly and discuss things."

A perplexed look appeared on Graham's face. He could not understand this attitude of light-hearted indifference.

"But, but——" he stammered.

"It's always as well, I think, to get things on a business footing."

"A business footing?" he repeated the words incredulously. "I don't understand, Gwen."

"And after all those protestations of yours, too! That immense passion that you'd fought so hard against. I imagined that it was leading up to something."

"Of course, yes; but 'business footing.'"

"One must live," she laughed, "even when one loves."

The look of perplexity was changing to one of alarmed misgiving.

"Business footing," he repeated. "You don't mean——?"

"What else should I mean, my poor, dear, simple Graham? How did you imagine that I lived?"

For a full minute he stared stupidly at her: till she was forced to repeat, mockingly, her question.

Miserably he shook his head.

"I don't know. I never thought. I never asked myself. I—you mean that there's a man behind all this?"

"Man? Men, my dear," she laughed. "You don't think one man could run to all I want?"

From his face suddenly all colour and all animation passed. Reaching a hand out blindly, he caught hold of the edge of the table and drew himself towards it.

"I see," he said dazedly. "I see."

The dumb anguish of his face tore with sharpened talons at her heart. Every instinct in her urged her to step forward, to throw her arms about his neck, to press her cheek against his face, to whisper in his ear that it was untrue: "Untrue, darling, every word of it. They've meant nothing to me—all these men. There's been nobody in my life but you. I've not even let them kiss me. It's untrue, every word of it."

Somehow or other, though, she managed to remain rooted where she stood, managed to keep in her eyes and on her lips the same flicker of ironic laughter, managed to retain her voice at the right note of indifferent raillery.

"Oh yes, my dear," she said. "Quite a number of them. I thought you were wanting to take a share in the syndicate."

His eyes were fixed in an unseeing stare upon the floor. He made no sound, he made no movement. His arms upon the table were strained and rigid.

"And aren't you wanting to?" The ache of her

heart was more grievous than anything she had ever known. Her knees were so weak that at any moment she felt that they might refuse any longer to support her. But as an actress, whose heart is breaking for some private loss, will set a house roaring with her feigned merriment, so with bright eyes and mocking voice Gwen Lawrence bore laughingly the part she had set herself to play.

"Or perhaps," she said, "you had pictured yourself as what they describe, I believe, in French novels as an *amant de cœur*."

His hands at his side hung limp and purposeless.

"So that," he said, "was what you meant when you talked of our deciding how to manage things?"

"What else should I mean?"

"Yet even now," he said, "I can't believe——"

"I should have thought that I had made it plain enough."

"That? Oh yes, that. It's other things. I——" he hesitated, then rather wistfully: "It's not easy, you know, to reform one's picture of a person. I thought you were something so completely different. You meant—it is rather hard to say what exactly you did mean to me. But I saw you as something rather wonderful. You represented all those things for me. Oh, I know it'll seem silly enough to you now, those things one reads about and dreams about and never quite expects to find. Poetry and mystery and romance——" He stopped and laughed awkwardly, a little bitterly.

He had spoken stammeringly. And as she had heard one by one the clumsy, faltered words, it had been only by the intensest effort that she had been restrained from flinging herself into his arms, from burying her face against his cheek, from crying, "Ah, but I am, I am! I am that other me. It's false, this picture of myself I've given."

But because she knew that that step once taken would be irretraceable, because she knew into what

waste places that road must ultimately curve, she kept bright and mocking the amber-coloured depths.

"And I'm not, you see," she said. "Perhaps no woman is. Perhaps we're all much the same at heart. Frivolous, pleasure-loving creatures, for whom men exist as kindly ginns who spread jam and butter on our bread. That's all we are. And occasionally when we rather like a man we can do without the butter. Which was perhaps, my dear, the part I had for you."

Her voice dropped a little at the last sentence, and the hardness went from it.

"That's all we are," she said, "and you make such a mistake in expecting more from us." Her eyes were tender now and a little misted. "That's what I used to be," she thought. "But there's nothing in the world I wouldn't give up now for you. Nothing. Nothing. Why, aren't I even giving up you because I love you so!"

Unsteadily Graham lifted himself from the table.

"I'd better be going, then," he said.

She made no answer. She stood leaning back against the mantelpiece, her arms spread out along it. This was the last time, she told herself, she would ever see him in this room. Never again would she hear the sound of his voice along the telephone. Never again when the telephone bell rang would she wonder with suddenly indrawn breath, "Can this be he?" Never again would they pass in happy, lazy talk the enchanted space of hours between tea and dinner. Never again.

Another minute and the door of the drawing-room would have closed behind him; another minute and there would be the heavy thud of the outside door; another minute and he would be out of her life for ever.

With slow, uncertain steps he walked towards the door; his fingers were upon the handle. Slowly they were turning it. He paused. Then suddenly he turned round towards her, and in his eyes and in his face flamed an impassioned protest.

"It isn't true," he shouted. "It isn't true. It's a

lie, all of it—every word of it. You are frightened, that's all it is. You're frightened, as I was frightened when I sold those shares. Frightened, as you've admitted that you were frightened when you left London hurriedly. I know, because I was frightened in just that same way myself, and I've got beyond fear now. As you will. As I'm going to make you. For it's a lie. You can't look me in the face and deny that it's a lie!"

He took a couple of quick steps towards her. Her elbow raised across her face, she shuddered back. Frightened? Frightened was it he had called her? Ah, but she was frightened now. Frightened lest she might not be strong enough to stay him.

Three more steps and he would be beside her, his hand would be upon her shoulder, and as his arms went round her the power to resist would slip from her. Passive, she would lie there in his arms. Docile and submissive, she would raise her lips to the mouth that sought them. And in the long silence of that kiss irrevocably would their fate be settled. Whatever happened, for his sake, she must defend herself from that.

"A lie?" she retorted recklessly. "But for what should I want to be telling lies to you? Of course, my poor innocent, it's the truth."

"Then why, if it's the truth, did you run away to Paris? Why did you tell me that you were frightened? What else was there to be frightened of except your loving of me as I loved you? Why, why, why?"

The repeated words beat like blows upon her guard. But as an experienced boxer will hold up his fists mechanically, as he waits with numbed senses for the gong, she flung back her answer on the former note of proud defiance.

"Frightened, perhaps that was too big a word. One uses a big word so easily at the end of a long evening. I wasn't frightened. But I thought it would be—how shall I put it?—just as well if you didn't—join the

syndicate. There are only twenty-four hours in the day. One must employ them as profitably as one can. And I didn't feel, my dear, that you were likely to be a fearfully good investment."

It was her supreme, her final effort. It was her last blow. But it sufficed. Steadily he looked in her face, then, without a word, turned quickly on his heel and left the room.

Motionless, her back to the fireplace, she stood staring at the blank doorway in which a moment earlier his figure had been framed.

"That's that, then," she thought. Her eyes were dry. The strength had returned to the limbs that had so nearly failed her. She felt neither hysterical nor faint. Something had died inside her, that was all. There was no more to be done about it.

The clock of a neighbouring church chimed the third quarter of the hour. She shook herself as hypnotic patients do on emerging from a trance. It was time that she made some plans for the passing of the evening.

A quarter to seven and Guy Fortescue would be almost certainly at his club. It would be, at any rate, worth trying.

"Grosvenor 85979. Yes. The Corinthian Club. Is Mr. Guy Fortescue in? He is? Good. Ah, is that you, Guy? It's Gwen speaking. No, I'm speaking from London. I got bored with Paris. What? Missing you? Oh, well, perhaps. Anyhow, what about this evening? You can? But that is charming of you. And you'll call for me at eight. Thank you so much, Guy dear. Good-bye."

Walking into the passage she called out to May Julian:

"You might put me on a bath, please, darling. The Chanel bath salts, and that silver tissue dress. Oh, and don't wait up for me. I'll be back late, I expect."

As though nothing had happened, or as though

there were nothing left to happen, unconcernedly Gwen Lawrence walked across the narrow strip of passage between her sitting-room and bedroom.

. . . . . .

To analyse your emotions and arrange your thoughts you must have reached some tavern of tranquillity. You cannot describe a railway journey while you are in the train. And Graham Moreton, as he drove his car westwards from Ciber Crescent, was in no condition to define the details of his emotional turmoil. He was conscious only of noise and tumult.

And, as once earlier, when the pressure on his brain had been too great, he sought relief in the bounding speed of his car along the metalled highroad. He had flung his hat, with his stick and gloves, upon the seat beside him, and the wind blew coldly through his hair, chilling his flushed cheeks.

The pale blue of the sky was deepening to violet as the car swung into the broad Kensington road. The lamps were lit; and the electric sky-signs were flaming their messages on to the converging roads of Hammersmith. At the Broadway the pavements were crowded with men and women returning home at the end of the long day's labour. For them, thought Graham enviously, there was peace. For the old there were the fireside and the evening paper, and the warm slippers in which one sat nodding after supper. And for the young the languid, desultory strolls beside the river; the noise and light and colour of the dance hall, or the twilit darkness of the cinema. The low whispers and the long farewells.

Over that crowded and ugly thoroughfare, where all day long newsboys and carts and trams and buses had maintained their orchestra of raucous and disordered sounds, for a moment at this hour of the day's suspension the breath of poetry trembled.

And the wind blew through Graham's hair and the car leapt forward to the touch of his foot on the accelerator; the road grew emptier and wider, and mile

by mile the pressure of the pain upon his forehead lessened.

. . . . . .

Unable to read, unable to focus her attention on anything outside her immediate trouble, with fretting, unhappy fingers, Joan Faversham turned page after page of an old novel.

Ever since Christopher had driven her back home after lunch she had fidgeted irritably about the house. Some time that day surely Graham would either ring her up or call. The fact of his having rung up on the previous evening was proof enough that, whatever he might have to say to her, he was resolved to say in person.

One way or another, she would learn the truth to-night. At any rate, she would know enough to be able to decide on her own campaign of action. Did Graham know that he had been seen by her in Paris? On that a lot depended. Had he seen her himself? Or had Mrs. Lawrence told him? That depended, she supposed, on whether Mrs. Lawrence would consider such information to be for or against her interests. Anyhow, either way, in a few moments she would know. But the afternoon had passed. And though she had started each time she had heard the sound of the telephone upon the stairs, there had not come once the tap of the maid's knuckles on her bedroom door: "You're wanted on the telephone, Miss Joan."

The afternoon had passed and the early evening. Mechanically she had taken her bath; mechanically, though with a prescience of approaching drama, she had put on an evening frock slightly more exciting than that which she was in the habit of wearing when she dined with her parents alone. Mechanically she had followed the dinner through its five-course length, mechanically exchanged with her father the conventionalities of domestic conversation. Curiously, from the other end of the table, her mother had sat watching her.

"You look very tired, Joan," she had remarked. "Oughtn't you to go to bed soon after dinner?"

But she had shaken her head.

"And wake up at five o'clock in the morning? Oh no, mother, I'm an eight-hour woman."

And after dinner, with the same old-fashioned novel upon her knee, she had sat waiting, listening.

It was not till after ten that it had come. Not till after ten that a rather flushed and awkward maid had announced that Mr. Graham Moreton had called.

"Oh, Graham, how nice!" Mrs. Faversham had said. "Do ask him to come up, Parkins."

But Joan had stayed her.

"Please, mother, if you don't mind, I'd rather see Graham alone this evening. There'll be a fire in the dining-room."

And her mother's grey head was nodded.

Dusty and dishevelled as he had been on that other evening, Graham stood waiting for her before the fireplace in the dining-room. And in his eyes was the same wild, strained, unhappy look.

"Joan," he cried.

As though nothing had happened, as though they were lovers meeting for the first time after an interval of several weeks, she ran towards him and lifted her face to his. In his kiss was something of that desperate quality that she had recognized on that other evening. And a fresh spasm of injured pride passed through her.

Why should she take what another woman had no use for, or had been unable to keep; why should she heal the wounds that another had inflicted? Angrily the words surged towards her lips, but she fought them back.

"It's good to have you back again, Jonakin," he was saying, and his hands were ruffling at the soft wavy hair.

So she had not seen, then, he was thinking. She had not seen him bending before the taxi beside Gwen

Lawrence. She had not seen, and they could return untroubled to their former intimacy.

"Joan, dear," he whispered. "I've good news for you. They've given me that job in London. I shan't ever have to go away again."

Her heart gave a bound of thankfulness. There was one thing only that those words could mean. He had made an end of whatever might have been between that Mrs. Lawrence and himself. He had made an end, and had come back to her. She said nothing, but she let her cheek rest for an instant against his.

"Then there's nothing, Joan, is there," he stammered, "to prevent our getting married at once?"

She drew her head back from his shoulder and looked him searchingly in the eyes. In what mood was he saying that? As an impassioned lover or a tired traveller? Had he come asking peace of her, or adventure: was it in passion or in tiredness that he had come?

Anyhow, did it so much matter as long as he had come? He was hers again now, and that was all that mattered. Hers, to be made to love her in what way she chose. Slowly her arms, her cool, soft arms, went round his neck, to wind themselves like chains about him.

"No," she repeated slowly: "nothing at all to prevent us marrying at once."

Unflinchingly she lifted her lips to his.

EPILOGUE

"BRIDE or bridegroom?"

In a pale grey Ascot tie, controlled above a fawn-grey double-breasted waistcoat by a pearl pin, a white gardenia in his buttonhole, the elegant figure of Christopher Stirling directed down the centre aisle of St. Mary Abbott's, Kensington, the friends of Joan Faversham and Graham Moreton.

It was twenty-five past two: in five minutes the bride would have arrived. At the end of the church beside the lectern Graham was pretending to be as little afflicted by self-consciousness as the best man, who was chatting affably at his elbow. The congestion in the doorway was considerable.

"We'd better start taking them round the side aisle, hadn't we?" one of the ushers whispered in Stirling's ear.

A tall bearded foreigner was hesitating in the porch.

"Bride or bridegroom?" Stirling asked.

The foreigner looked at him in perplexity.

"Vat?" he said.

"Are you the friend of the bride, sir, or the bridegroom?"

Beneath their bushy eyebrows the black eyes flashed aggressively.

"I am the Comte de Freydros," the reply came, "and I have received an invitation to the wedding."

With a smile Christopher led him to a tolerably good position in the right-hand aisle. A business acquaintance of Graham, he suspected.

The first notes of the voluntary had begun. The

choir rose in their places. At the altar rail the priest was standing. The congregation had risen to its feet. All down the aisle there was a turning of heads towards the door.

Slowly, at her father's side, a film of fluttering whiteness, Joan Faversham moved up the church, a long sheaf of lilies lying along her arm. Behind him as he faced the altar Graham could hear the muffled tread draw closer. There was a rustle of georgette beside him, a stirring of powdered fragrance. They were together now.

As the verger closed the door, the six ushers moved to the pew that had been reserved for them. They could not see a great deal from where they sat, and for the most part they were contented with a casual scrutiny of the congregation. The service was only a prelude, after all. The real show would start when they got back to Mansion Court.

But Christopher, who had been to so many weddings; who had sat so often on hard pews speculating idly on the measure of entertainment that was probably to be derived from the subsequent reception; Christopher, for whom the parade of weddings fashionable and unfashionable had ceased long since to hold any novel flavour, found himself this once following closely the rhythm of the words that were being intoned by the white-robed ministrant.

How solemn, after all, they were—" For better for worse; for richer for poorer; in sickness and health." What an immense oath in view of life's limitless concessions and contingencies! One was so familiar with the words that forty-nine times out of fifty one never noticed them. They were part of the nuptial ritual, along with the clothes one wore, and the presents and the invitations. And then would come that fiftieth time, when for one or other, or for both of the two young people standing at the altar there, one felt more than the casual interest of acquaintanceship; when one was able, through one's caring for them, to appreciate the

immensity and solemnity of the obligation that was being laid on them.

For better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and health. They were big words, and to be used as they were so often used, so recklessly. . . .

. . . . . .

There were between three and four hundred guests at the reception. The rooms and stairs and passages were crowded. In the alcove of the drawing-room the efforts of a string quartet were scarcely audible. The noise in the dining-room was deafening. For a moment Christopher hesitated at the doorway. At his elbow a group of young and enlivened persons were discussing their impressions of the ceremony.

"I felt," one of them was saying, "as though I were witnessing an execution."

"Whenever I come away from a wedding, I pinch myself all over as one does after a nightmare to make certain one's still there."

"Not," the retort came, "that there's much more difference between free love and marriage than there is between buying the freehold of a house and taking a ninety-nine years' lease of it. In either case you have to hang on till someone takes it off your hands."

By the table before the cake Joan and Graham were standing side by side. She was still carrying across her arm the sheaf of lilies, symbol of innocence, from whose heart had been cut away the golden pollen-crested stalks, at the loss, perhaps, of a little of their fragrance. Ah, well, thought Christopher, one could not have anything both ways. Through the hedge of congratulatory compliments he elbowed his way towards her.

"I must touch glasses with you once," he said.

She smiled up into his face and in the cornflower-blue eyes was a glow of happiness that had been for a long time absent there.

"You're very kind to me," she said. "I'll always remember it."

He said nothing, but as he smiled back at her above

his glass he felt that it was good-bye that she was saying. A debt was paid. She would have no need now of him.

Then someone else came up.

"So that's that," he thought. "And I suppose I'd better go and see the presents."

. . . . . .

"Rather be a wife than a stenographer." How typical, how symptomatic that remark had been of the Georgian attitude to love.

Love in these days. How remote it was from the old and simple need by which primitive men and women were surprised into the responsibilities of parenthood. How remote too from the gilded conception of mediaeval chivalry. "Rather be a wife than a stenographer." It was the putting to one's own use of a force from which one stood apart, as the engineers put to their own use the thundering torrents of Niagara. In a scientific age natural forces were not allowed to waste themselves. Love in these days.

For Sybyl it was a profession.

> *"I want to be happy*
> *But I can't be happy*
> *Till I've made you happy too."*

Crooningly from the alcove at his back, the yearning strains quivered through the heated air. That fond, that childish belief in happiness; with half the world looking for love, as the gate to that enchanted playground: and the other half exploiting their search of it. To Sybyl Marchant love was a profession, preferable because less arduous to commerce. To Mildred Atkinson it was a ladder by which she could lift herself from the conditions of her upbringing. Humphrey was no more than the first rung. He had seen her only that morning lunching with John Heresy. For Madge Gillett it provided a steady and grubby income. About the shoulders of

Gwen Lawrence it had cast the weight of sables. And was it not the inspiration of that kindly vanity that brought sitters to his studio? Directly or indirectly, it purchased for all of them a means of livelihood. The less one believed in it, the more profitable it became. It was only for those who had faith in love, like that lovely creature at Madge Gillett's who could not simulate emotion because love-making was a real thing to her, that love would yield no sustenance.

" I want to be happy
But I can't be happy
Till I've made you happy too."

The drawing-room was emptier now, and one or two couples were attempting not too successfully to dance. In the hall below the crowd was gathering. In a few moments Joan and Graham would be running through the shower of rose leaves towards the car. There would be cheers and laughter, and the waving of hands; a crush of wheels, and the long car swinging into Prince's Gate. And Joan and Graham in its cushioned twilight at last alone together.

Ah, well; but that at least was real.

. . . . . .

The party broke up slowly after the departure of the bride and bridegroom. There remained still much admirable champagne; and folk had reached that mood of detached hilarity when time and engagements in other parts of London seem of very secondary importance.

It was not, in fact, till after half-past five that Christopher found himself shaking the limp hand of an exhausted hostess. There had been some talk of going on for bridge and cocktails at the " In and Out," And Humphrey had succeeded in persuading the youngest of the ushers to escort him to a Turkish bath; but Christopher had declined the offer of additional hilarity. He was not, for one thing, in the mood for

it, and he had half promised Gwen Lawrence an account of the proceedings. She had been sent, but had not unnaturally refused, an invitation.

"You can come and tell me," she had said, "all about it afterwards."

The warmth had gone out of the amber October sunlight as he drove his car eastwards through the park. The few people that were still out of doors were either walking quickly or had fur collars drawn tightly round their necks.

But loveliness had lingered in a final moment of suspended decadence over the brown and golden spaces that a faint mist was covering. Soon would winter come, with early frosts and the rain-splashed places. But for the moment London wore the russet mantle of its autumn beauty. And as Christopher drove slowly northwards towards Bayswater, a sense of exhilaration that he had not known for many days enveloped him. He seemed to be seeing through new eyes the London that had become stale for him through familiarity. He saw it with the freshness that he had felt twenty years earlier, when he had come to it as a student, to paint his early pictures. As freshly, but differently; for he was a different person. And as his eyes travelled over the thronged pavements of Oxford Street, he wondered with a thrilled quickening of his pulse whether he were not on the brink of a rediscovery of himself.

. . . . . .

17A Ciber Crescent was, he was surprised to find, in such a condition of chaos as he had seen it on the day of Gwen's precipitate return from Paris. The curtains had been taken from the windows; the pictures stacked upon the chesterfield; and in the passage stood a couple of large white-wood packing cases.

"Good heavens! Gwen," he said, "what does all this mean?"

"I'm going away," she said.

"Away, why?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

" Why does anyone go away? For a change, I suppose. But about the wedding: tell me about that."

He handed her the four-page sheet of the service. " There wasn't a sermon," he told her, " just an address for the two of them." He described the reception; the best man's speech; the ample proportions of the Favershams' hospitality; and certain curiously out-moded garments that he had observed upon the figures of the unfashionable.

" Altogether a very convivial party."

" And was Joan looking pretty? "

" Very."

Shrewdly, but friendlily, she looked at him.

" You were in love with her, I suppose," she said. Said it with the intonation, not of a question but of a statement.

He did not prevaricate or flush.

" Perhaps," he answered.

" Ah, but of course you were, you wouldn't have bothered about me and Graham if you hadn't been. You've watched enough young men making mistakes without trying to prevent them. It's their look out, you've said. As it is, of course. But Graham was different, because Joan's happiness was in his hands. You weren't going to let Joan be made unhappy without a fight. That's the only reason you bothered about Graham and myself."

" Perhaps."

" And yet," she said slowly, " if you'd let Graham make an ass of himself over me, you could have had Joan for yourself. She liked you. She'd have married you on the rebound. Why didn't you let her? "

It was his turn now to shrug his shoulders.

" I don't know," he said, " that I'd have made her awfully happy."

She smiled.

" In fact, both of us, I suppose, gave up the person

that we wanted, because we cared enough for them to feel that they'd be happier elsewhere."

"Perhaps."

The quiet autumn twilight was darkening the room so that it was difficult for them to see the expression on each other's faces. The red brick of the houses opposite was turning black; the sky was no longer whitened where the sharp outline of roof and chimney-stack divided it.

"And what are you going to do now?" he asked. "Are you going abroad?"

"I think so," she said. "This place is too full of memories. I don't believe that I could stand it. And I've been rather spoilt now for this sort of life. It's not much of a show, really. I'd better find something else to do."

"You're getting rid of the flat?"

She nodded.

"I'm selling pretty well everything that's in it. I don't want to be bothered by possessions. And I don't want to be bothered for lack of money. I shall clear a good deal on it, I expect. There are one or two quite decent things here. And I'm not going to take jewellery where it's likely to be stolen."

She ceased, and they sat in silence. Content to be in silence. Somewhere within a few miles of them, in the carriage of some train that was rushing southwards, alone and absorbed in each other, were those two whom they had loved; whom in their different ways they had each wanted, but whom they had renounced for lack of faith in their own ability to make them happy. With the eyes of vision they could see them in the corner of their reserved carriage. On the seat beside them would be lying the pile of magazines that they had never meant to read, but which they had bought because the purchase of papers on a railway journey was one of the things that was expected of you. Side by side, their arms about each other, the smooth surface of her cheek rested on his roughness, watching

through half-closed eyes the misted countryside; they would not be talking, but their lips every now and again would meet and cling together. Why say in words what could be so much better said in kisses?

With a little shiver Gwen Lawrence lifted herself from her seat.

"It's getting dark," she said, "and I'll soon be hungry. You can take me out to dinner if you like."

"I shall be delighted."

For a moment she rested her hand upon his shoulder.

"You're not a bad sort, Christopher," she said. "I don't think I could have borne this evening with anybody else."

On his shoulder her fingers tightened for a moment. And through the mind of each passed the same unworded thought.

"Whatever we may be, whatever we may become, we'll always have this behind us; that with all the things for which we were too small allowed for, there was this one thing once for which we were too big."